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UNDER SEALED ORDERS

A Novel

BY

GRANT ALLEN

AUTHOR OF

'THE TENTS OF SHEM,' 'THE DUCHESS OF POWYSLAND,'
'THE SCALLYWAG,' ETC.



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UNDER SEALED ORDERS

CHAPTER I.

THE RED COTTAGE.

ALL these fine things were to be seen in Sacha's studio.

Now, Sacha's studio was allowed to be the prettiest room in all the house. Sacha said so herself, indeed, and she was an authority on decoration. And she said the truth. Such a queer little lop-sided, five-cornered, irregular nook of a room you never saw in all your life. It was built out from one angle of the external wall, and lighted up from the

north side by a big square bay - window, which projected cornerwise, anyhow, into the lawn and orchard. It was quaint because it never aimed at quaintness; it achieved it unconsciously. And the outlook was charming, too, over the brook and the hillside; no more satisfying view, Sacha held, among the Surrey hills than the larches above, and the pear-trees below as seen across the foreground of lavender and poppies from her studio window-seat at the Red Cottage. Throw in an easel or two, carelessly posed, a few soft Liberty draperies, a Lewis Day wallpaper, an Oriental rug, a great Japanese screen, and Aunt Julia's black silk gown (with Aunt Julia inside it) to give dignity to the foreground, and there, as well as this poor hand can draw it, you have a fair rough sketch of Sacha Cazalet's sanctum.

‘For my part,’ said Owen, straightening his arm and then bending it so as to display the biceps, ‘I shouldn't mind a little rain.

'The heavier the ground is, the better my chances.'

Sacha looked up at him in his becoming running suit; he'd been sitting, or rather posing, for her as joint winner at the tape in her spirited picture of 'A Dead Heat—the Finish,' and she thought to herself as she looked, though he *was* her own brother, that a handsomer or finer-built or stronger-looking young man wasn't to be found that day in the length and breadth of England. She drew a deep breath, and added a delicate touch to the stiffened muscle of the straining forearm. 'But it'd be a pity,' she said, stepping back a pace and surveying her own work critically, 'if it rained while we're actually on the ground to-morrow. You men have no thought. Consider our nice new gowns, and hats, and feathers.'

'It's a dreadful waste of time,' Aunt Julia interposed, smoothing her immaculate white hair behind her blameless lace head-dress.

‘I shall be glad when it’s all over, I’m sure, and you get back to your books again, Owen. Young men of twenty ought to have something else to busy themselves about in the world, it seems to me, besides high jumps, and hundred yards, and half-miles, and hurdle races.’ Aunt Julia mentioned the very names of those offensive exercises with a certain high-sniffing dislike, and as if between unwilling quotation marks. A model district visitor, Aunt Julia, if ever there was one; a distributor of tracts and good counsel gratis; a pillar of orthodoxy; a prop of the University Central African Mission.

‘Mr. Hayward approves of them,’ Owen answered with the air of a man who stifles opposition by citing a crushing authority. ‘I suppose you don’t want me to neglect Mr. Hayward’s wishes. He says what he desires above all things is to see me a typical English gentleman. Now, there’s nothing more English than athletics, you’ll admit,

Aunt Julia. He's always delighted when he finds me going in hot and strong for cricket and football and boating. "Be cosmopolitan in your ideas," he says to me always—"as cosmopolitan as you can make yourself; but be English in your pursuits, your costume, your habits."

'I don't think he need be much afraid of *that*,' Sacha put in with a smile, washing her brush out in chloroform. 'You're English to the backbone, Owen; I could tell by the very build and set of your limbs you had true English blood in you.'

'Well, if it rains to-night,' Owen went on, releasing himself from his fatiguing pose, and flinging himself down like a young giant on the capacious window-seat, 'I shall pull off the mile, and, after all, that's the only event of the whole lot I really care twopence about.'

Aunt Julia's curiosity was so fully aroused by this unexpected avowal that she deigned

for a moment to display a passing interest in athletics. 'Why, I thought,' she cried, astonished, 'you were certain of the long jump, and the half-mile, and the cricket ball.'

'That's just it,' Owen replied, stretching his left arm in turn and then retracting it suddenly. 'I'm safe as houses for those, and so I don't mind a bit about 'em. But I'm no good at all for the mile unless the ground's heavy. On light ground, Charlie Skene's sure to beat me. If it rains there'll be a good race—like Sacha's picture there—and that's just what I love: won by a neck at the finish.' And he glanced at his own shapely limbs on his sister's canvas with not unnatural approbation of her handicraft or her model.

'Better go and put on your other clothes now,' Aunt Julia remarked with an under-current of doubt. She was never quite sure in her own mind whether it was exactly right for Sacha to paint even her own

brother, let alone the professional model, in so light and airy a costume; besides which, those short sleeves must be conducive to rheumatism. Aunt Julia pinned her faith on the protective virtues of red flannel. If she'd had her own way, she'd have cased Owen from head to foot in that triple armour against assailing chills. But there! what can one do? Young people nowadays are so self-willed and obstinate!

Owen rose from the window-seat and shook himself like a big dog just released from the kennel. 'Well, they *are* rather chilly to sit in,' he admitted, reading Aunt Julia's mind, which, for the rest, was an open book with very few pages in it. 'I don't mind if I do go and put on my toggeries; but I'll just take a sharp trot first round the meadows to warm me.'

He stood with his hand on the door, on the point of starting, when a timid knock outside made him open it suddenly. Martha

was standing there with an envelope on the salver. A well-trained servant, Martha. She knew it was as much as her place was worth to burst into the studio without leave while Miss Sacha was painting there. If there's anything on earth that's destructive to a work of art, in pigments or words, it's continual interruption in the midst of your working hours. And to disturb a model's pose, Sacha often remarked, is nothing short of criminal.

'What is it?' Owen asked, taking the envelope from the salver.

'Telegram, sir,' Martha replied. 'Boy's waiting below in the 'all for the answer.'

Owen read it, and bit his lips. 'Well, this is just annoying!' he cried. 'Who do you think's coming down? Mr. Hayward himself—and at twelve o'clock to-morrow.'

A sudden silence fell all at once upon the little listening group. They looked at one another and bit their lips in embarrassment.

Clearly, some unexpected damper had been put at once upon all Owen's plans. Sacha was the first to break the awkward pause. 'At twelve,' she said musingly. 'And the sports, I think, begin at ten, don't they?'

'Nominally ten,' Owen answered, still regarding the telegram with a very rueful face; 'but that always means practically half-past ten or thereabouts. Punctuality's a virtue that hasn't been yet evolved. They take such a precious long time clearing the course and so forth.'

Sacha consulted the card of the sports and then the local time-table.

'You'd have time, if you liked, for the hundred yards, and perhaps the long jump, too, before his train gets in,' she said, with as deep an interest as if thousands were at stake; 'and even then you could go down to the train in your flannels to meet him. But you'd miss the mile, and that you say's the only event of the lot you care about.'

Sacha had lived long enough in an athlete's family, you see, to know that 'event' was the proper word to apply to these particular engagements.

Aunt Julia beamed horror through her scandalized spectacles.

'Why, you don't mean to say, Sacha,' she cried with what breath she could muster up from the depths of her outraged bosom, 'you thought Owen might go down to meet Mr. Hayward at the Moor Hill Station in those dreadful racing things.'

Sacha gazed up at her blandly.

'Yes I did, auntie,' she answered in that calm, soft voice of hers. 'That was exactly my idea. Why not? They're so becoming.'

The want of reverence for their elders in young people nowadays is positively something little short of appalling.

Aunt Julia gasped.

'Go . . . down . . . to the station . . . in those clothes?' she repeated, feebly gazing

at Owen, open-mouthed. 'Oh! Sacha, how can you?'

Owen watched his sister's face askance to see what she'd answer. But that imperturbable young lady had made up her mind by this time.

'No, you had better not go, my dear,' she said promptly, after a short pause for consideration. 'Don't be at the station at all. Run your races exactly as if nothing had happened. Mr. Hayward'll be pleased that you've trained and gone in for so many prizes. There's nothing he likes better than seeing you a thorough Englishman. Never mind about *him*. I'll run down to meet him myself, and bring him up to the field to you.'

'Sacha!' Aunt Julia ejaculated once more. It was all she could say. The situation was too dreadful. Words failed her to express herself.

But her niece was not a young woman to

be turned from her purpose by the interjectional application of her own Christian name. She knew it already. She was three years older than Owen, and her character was more formed; besides, she was a professional artist and earned her own living. Your independent woman is a feature of this age. She has acquired initiative. She thinks and acts for herself, without the need for a father, a husband, or a brother to lean upon.

‘Martha,’ the independent woman said briskly, turning round to the maid, ‘bring me a telegraph form from the dining-room.’ And Martha flew down for it like one who knew that Miss Sacha at least would not be kept waiting.

The mistress of the studio sat down at her desk and filled it in :

‘Delighted to see you to-morrow. Owen busy athletics. Will meet you at station

myself, unless rain. Wire back if you wish Owen to stop away.

‘SACHA CAZALET.’

She handed it across to her brother.

‘Will that do?’ she said quietly.

Owen stepped nearer and kissed her.

‘You *are* a brick, Sacha,’ he said, ‘and no mistake! How splendidly you manage things! That’s just the way to do it.’

‘For my part,’ Aunt Julia observed, glancing over his shoulder through her spectacles with the disapproving eye before which many a beer-absorbing labourer in the village had quailed in his shoes, ‘I call it exceedingly disrespectful from a boy like Owen to a man in Mr. Hayward’s position.’

‘Oh, *he* won’t mind,’ Sacha answered, like one who knows her ground. ‘He’s a very odd man, of course. And he demands obedience. But he goes in above everything for making Owen athletic. It’s the spirit,

not the letter, Mr. Hayward cares about. He'll be delighted to come up to the grounds and see him run. Don't *you* be afraid, auntie. I'll make things all right with him, I promise you, at the station.'

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERIOUS VISITOR.

As the 12.4 train steamed into Moor Hill Station next morning Sacha was there, to her word, in good time to meet it. A handsome, upstanding, self-contained sort of a girl, Sacha Cazalet, not unworthy in physique to be a crack athlete's sister. As she stood there on the platform, in her soft artistic dress and her wide-brimmed Rubens hat, with the calm, strong face beneath it, she looked as if she might have stepped that moment straight out of one of her own graceful and earnest pictures.

The train pulled up with a jerk. 'Mer-ill, Mer-ill, Mer-ill!' cried the porters in chorus

in their accustomed shorthand, and a passenger or two, divining by good chance that these cabalistic sounds represented Moor Hill in the vernacular tongue, descended slowly from the carriages with bags, rugs, and bundles. Amongst them was one noticeable man in a rough tweed suit, tall, thin, and time-worn, but a typical aristocrat as to mien and features, with a clear-cut, statuesque, intellectual face, clean-shaven all over but for its heavy black moustaches. He came down, it is true, in a third-class carriage, and he had nothing in his hand but a stout untrimmed stick, which he had evidently cut for himself on some blackthorn-covered common; but he was none the less a gentleman confessed for all that: blue blood shone clear in his face, his walk, his tone, his gestures.

The noticeable man took Sacha's hand cordially, with a certain stately condescension, yet as one who liked her.

‘So you came to meet me, Alexandra?’ he said, smiling. ‘That was awfully good of you. *Your* plan, of course. You did quite right to let Owen go off to his sports unmolested. I appreciated your telegram. But there! that’s your way—you can always be depended upon.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call me Alexandra,’ the girl answered with a little shudder, yet taking his hand as cordially as he gave it. ‘You know I hate the name. I always so much prefer to be known as Sacha.’

Mr. Hayward turned towards the gate and gave up his ticket.

‘Alexandra’s so much better, though,’ he said slowly, in his soft, musical voice. ‘It’s good English now, since a princess brought it over. All English names come across to us in the last resort with a prince or princess. We haven’t got a native one. William and Henry and John and Robert came over with the Conqueror; Ernest and Augustus and

Caroline and Sophia came over with the Georges; Alexandra and Olga and Christian and Dagmar came over with the very latest royal importations. But English snobbery seizes on them and adopts them at once. That's the English fashion. Whereas Sacha carries date, as you say about your gowns. People are sure to inquire when they hear it in what country of Europe Sacha's short for Alexandra. And *that*,' he paused a second, 'would interfere with my views for Owen's future.'

'I prefer the name I've always been called by myself,' Sacha interposed quietly, and then closed her lips short.

It was diamond against diamond with those two, both firm as a rock in their own fixed opinions.

Mr. Hayward answered nothing—at least, not directly.

'Owen Cazalet,' he murmured with a sigh, as if half to himself, rolling it over on his

tongue—‘Owen Cazalet, Owen Cazalet. Couldn’t have anything that would sound much more British than that, I flatter myself. Though Owen’s Welsh, to be sure, when one goes to the bottom of things, and Cazalet’s Huguenot. But British enough as times go nowadays—British enough, Owen Cazalet.’

‘For myself, I confess, if it weren’t for business purposes,’ Sacha replied obliquely, ‘I should much prefer in many ways my own family name. I hate disguises. But of course, as I’ve got to be known now as Sacha Cazalet to picture-buyers and publishers, I must stick to it for the future. As an illustrator my practice depends largely on the name. It’s a good trade-mark for the purpose, thank Heaven! distinctive and striking. And I can’t change it now unless some amiable young man chooses to offer me his, which doesn’t seem likely in the present state of society.’

‘Well, I’m glad you can’t change it, my child,’ Mr. Hayward said, not unkindly, looking down at her with eyes of unfeigned admiration. He was old enough to be her father, and he spoke to her always with a certain old-fashioned paternal courtesy, much as a Louis Quinze marquis of the stately type might have spoken before the Court to mademoiselle his daughter. ‘It would be a pity if any such suggestion of un-English antecedents were to stand in the way of my plans for your brother’s advancement.’

‘It would,’ Sacha replied. ‘I admit it. I acquiesce in it.’

They walked on together to the cricket-field, where the sports were to be held, Mr. Hayward stopping every now and then with genuine delight in the country to admire some pretty spray of young bramble or cluster of hart’s-tongue in the hedgerow. He had an artist’s eye for nature, like Sacha’s own. The tangled richness of the

stitchworts and red-robins by the wayside seemed to charm and impress him.

‘It’s sweet country,’ he said at last, pausing and gazing deep into the recesses of the bush-grown bank. ‘What exquisite depths of shade! What luscious richness of foliage!’

‘Yes,’ Sacha replied, in the same tone; ‘such a struggle for life, too, isn’t it? Each fighting for his own hand; each craning and straining to overtop the other. Like the world we live in.’

‘As it stands now,’ Mr. Hayward assented gravely—‘a tangled maze, a mere unorganized thicket. Yet some day it might become an ordered and orderly garden.’

‘That would be so much less picturesque, though,’ Sacha suggested, sighing.

‘Less picturesque? Yes, perhaps,’ Mr. Hayward cried, like one who sees some vision of delight. ‘But, oh! Sacha, what of that? More useful and more hopeful?’

As they reached the cricket-field, Sacha

glanced around for a moment to see where among the crowd of spectators Aunt Julia was seated. Her quick eye soon picked out the immaculate white hair among a little group of local dignitaries near the centre by the pavilion. Mr. Hayward advanced and lifted his hat to Miss Cazalet with that indescribable air of courtly chivalry that was well-nigh inseparable from his smallest action. Aunt Julia received the bow with mingled respect and distant disapprobation. A strange sort of man, Mr. Hayward, not to be counted upon in some things; quite a gentleman in every sense of the word, of course; but somehow, to Aunt Julia's district-visiting type of mind, extremely awe-inspiring and not a little uncanny. She was never quite sure, if the truth must be told, as to Mr. Hayward's principles. And principles were to Aunt Julia, as to the British matron in general, objects of a distinct and almost idolatrous reverence.

Mr. Hayward joined the group, and fell into the conversation at once with the practised skill of a man of the world. They were discussing 'that dangerous book,' 'A Rural Idyll,' by Margaret Forbes, which Aunt Julia considered 'undermined the very groundwork of our social morality.'

Lady Beaumont, the county member's wife, lolling back on her chair, gave a languid assent; she'd read the story herself, and only remembered now she'd found it interesting; but as Miss Cazalet disapproved of it, why, of course, as politeness demanded she disapproved in concert.

It was Miss Forbes they were talking about? Mr. Hayward asked, smiling curiously. Ah, yes, a very clever woman, too, and a bishop's daughter! What an irony of fate! He'd heard one or two good stories in town about her. Mrs. Forbes, the bishoppess, was quite proud of the book's success; but, as her daughter remarked, 'If

I hadn't written it, mamma wouldn't have touched it with a pair of tongs, you know.'

He knew her then, Lady Beaumont suggested, with a careless interest, from the chair beside Aunt Julia's.

Mr. Hayward waved a graceful and half-deprecatory negative. No, he didn't exactly know her—that's to say, not as on visiting terms—but from time to time he ran up against her in London drawing-rooms. Sooner or later, in fact, one ran up against almost everybody worth knowing in any way. London's so small, you see; and the world's so shrunken nowadays.

Lady Beaumont glanced the mute inquiry with her languishing eyes:

'And, pray, who's your fine friend?'

Aunt Julia introduced him with a rather awkward consciousness:

'Lady Beaumont—my nephew's guardian—you've heard me speak of him—Mr. Hayward.'

The county member's wife put up her long-handled tortoiseshell quizzing-glass, 'the aristocratic outrage' Sacha always called it, and surveyed Mr. Hayward for full fifty seconds with such a keen, searching glance as only your hardened woman of society dare ever bestow on a fellow-creature.

A plain Mister, then! She'd imagined him a general at least, if not a baronet or an honourable.

Mr. Hayward stood it out calmly, unmoved and unconscious, with that imperturbable smile of his. Then he drew over a vacant chair with one well-bred hand, sat down upon it just behind them, and, as if on purpose to overcome some initial prejudice, began a delightful flow of the most amusing gossip. Even Lady Beaumont smiled often. He handled small-talk like a master. And how he knew his world, too!—Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Constantinople, the little German spas, the Norwegian fiords, the Dutch and

Danish kurhauses, the Pyrenean watering-places. Who was there at Cannes whose whole domestic history he hadn't at his finger-ends? Who was there at Florence whose flirtations with the Marchese This or the Contessa That, as case and sex might be, he couldn't chronicle fluently? What family skeleton lurked secure in its native cupboard from his piercing scrutiny? And it wasn't all mere scandal and gossip, either. There was history in it as well; profound grasp of national life, profound knowledge of the twists and turns of human nature. For Mr. Hayward was a psychologist, and while he fitted his conversation to his hearers' intellects, he always let you feel through it all that he himself was something higher and bigger than the world he described—that he laughed in his sleeve all the while at its foibles and its follies.

As for Sacha, sitting beside him and listening silently, as was her wont—for she

was restrained of nature and little given to speech—to his brilliant flow of witty society talk, she couldn't help wondering to herself now and again how a man so intelligent and so able as Mr. Hayward could possibly lower himself to so feeble a level, could waste himself contentedly on such an unworthy flow of pure human tittle-tattle. And Mr. Hayward on his side, too, seemed to be conscious of her feeling, for with infinite tact he managed to turn to her now and again, and add, as it were for her special benefit, a little aside containing some profounder reflection or some more interesting detail. Was it Madrid he was talking of? After he'd rattled on to Aunt Julia and Lady Beaumont of that famous bull-fight where the Duke of Medini-Coeli got his collar-bone broken, he went off at a tangent for ten minutes with a word or two to Sacha about the blaze of colour in the streets, or the Murillos in the Prado. Was it to Venice he'd got now? After describing

for the listening group in front his adventure in a gondola with the editor of the *Fianjulla* and a Neapolitan prima donna, he diverged into a little private disquisition behind on the mosaics of St. Mark's and the Athenian lion at the gate of the Arsenal. Altogether, 'a most well-informed man of the world,' Lady Beaumont thought to herself. 'Quite an acquisition for the day in our society at Moor Hill, in spite of his principles,' Aunt Julia reflected inwardly; and 'What a pity he wastes his talents so!' Sacha meditated with regret. But she was wrong, for all that. He wasn't wasting them—not a bit of it. That was his *rôle* in life. To be all things to all men—and all women, too, bettering even the comprehensive Apostolic injunction—was the secret of his profession.

At last there came a pause, a sudden break in the flowing current. The mile was now on, and Sacha saw for herself that all the while, amid his gossip, though Mr. Hayward

was so fluent of varied experiences in all corners of Europe, his eyes had none the less followed Owen perpetually round the field with quite as much eagerness and constancy as her own had done. At the finish he bent his head forward for a moment in anxiety, then sprang from his chair in his joy.

‘Bravo! bravo!’ he cried, clapping his hands with unaffected delight as the tape fell forward. ‘Owen wins! Owen wins! Well done, my boy! Well done! You must be proud of him, Miss Cazalet. A splendid race, and just carried by a fine spurt. I never saw anything better in my life than the magnificent way he did those last ten yards in!’

He sat down again, quite flushed with vicarious pride in his ward's success. His face was beaming.

‘I wish I'd brought my little snap camera with me,’ he cried, ‘to take an instantaneous of that final dash-in. It was so beautiful, so

perfect. The action of that boy's limbs, like a thoroughbred racer's—why, it's a picture to look at.'

At the words Lady Beaumont raised the class outrage once more, and took a second long stony stare at the well-informed stranger. Could it be? No, impossible! But, yes, she was sure of it. She couldn't be mistaken now. She'd suspected it from the very first, and in those words the man himself as good as admitted it.

No colonel! No baronet! But a common man from a shop in London!

'I think,' she said very deliberately, in that glassy, cold voice of hers, 'I've seen you before, Mr. Hayward. You say one knocks up against almost everybody in town, and I've knocked up against you somewhere. Haven't we met—at a photographer's shop, I think—in Bond Street?'

Aunt Julia quailed. Sacha leant forward curiously. Lady Beaumont tapped her

quizzing-glass on her knee with the air of a detective who unmasks a clever disguise. Mr. Hayward himself alone smiled on blandly as ever.

‘Yes, I remember it perfectly,’ he said, with, if possible, a still more self-possessed and high-bred air and manner than before. ‘At Mortimer and Co.’s in Bond Street. I had the pleasure of a sitting from you for the *Gallery of Fashion*. I edit the series. My name’s Lambert Hayward; but in Bond Street I’m known under the style and title of Mortimer and Co., photographers.’

There was an awkward pause, though only an infinitesimal one. Lady Beaumont flushed crimson. But Mr. Hayward was too perfect a conversationalist to let even such a point-blank thrust from a very clumsy hand mar the effect of his *causerie*. He went on with the subject at issue as unconcernedly as though Lady Beaumont were in the habit of dining every evening with her photographer.

‘And instantaneous views are a perfect passion of mine,’ he continued carelessly. ‘I love to get a good subject, like Owen in that last spurt, or a yacht at the turning-point, to catch a really graceful movement and record it in a lightning flash. You’d hardly believe, Lady Beaumont, how much skill and knowledge it requires to choose the exact instant when a figure in motion is at its picturesque best. But Sacha here knows it well. Even the most exquisite dancing has a great many intermediate points or passing attitudes that are artistically impossible. Only a few select poses are really useful for art, and those few must be discriminated and registered with incredible rapidity.’

‘So I should think,’ Sacha interposed, not unappreciative of the gracious tact of his tribute to her artistic taste, as well as the unusual concession implied in calling her by her pet name of Sacha; ‘and I’ve often noticed, indeed, how much all instantaneous

photographs, except yours, Mr. Hayward, are wanting for that very reason in spirit and vigour. The others look wooden, and unreal, and angular—yours alone are instinct with actual life and motion.'

'Ah, you look at them with an artist's eye, you see,' Mr. Hayward responded quietly; 'the more we understand the difficulties to be encountered and overcome in any art, however mechanical, the more do we learn to appreciate it and to respect its producers.'

Lady Beaumont leant back in her rough rush-bottomed chair, and knit her brows abstractedly. The problem was not yet solved, it was only intensified. Who on earth could he be, then, this strange high-bred-looking man, with the manners of a diplomatist and the acquirements of a *savant*, who yet turned out to be nothing more, when one came to look into it, than a photographer in Bond Street? She remembered now she'd been struck when he 'took' her

by his gentlemanly address and his evident knowledge. But she certainly never credited him then with the close familiarity with men and things which he'd shown in his rambling and amusing conversation that morning in the cricket-field.

CHAPTER III.

GUARDIAN AND WARD.

AFTER a few minutes' more talk it struck Miss Cazalet suddenly that Mr. Hayward had only just come down from town, and would not improbably approve of a little refreshment. Sacha and Lady Beaumont, however, refused his courtly offer of an escort to the luncheon tent, and were left behind on their seats as he strolled off carelessly across the grounds with Aunt Julia beside him.

'My dear Sacha,' Lady Beaumont began, as soon as he was well out of earshot, still following him through the quizzing-glass, 'what an extraordinary man! and what an

extraordinary trade—or ought one to say profession? Why, till I recognised who he was, do you know, I took him for a gentleman.'

'So he is,' Sacha responded quietly, but with crushing force—'a gentleman all over. I never met anybody who deserved the name better than our Mr. Hayward.'

She spoke with proprietary pride, as if the man belonged to her.

Lady Beaumont let drop the outrage, scanned her close with the naked eye, and then hedged prudently, as became a county member's wife, who must conciliate everybody. 'Oh, of course,' she said with a slight drawl. 'A perfect gentleman—in voice and manners; one can see that at a glance, if only by the way he walks across the lawn. But I meant, I took him[at first sight for somebody really distinguished—not connected with trade, don't you know: a gentleman by birth and education and position. A

military man, I fancied. You could have knocked me down with a feather, my dear, when he said right out he was a photographer in Bond Street.'

'*You* said it, you mean, not he,' Sacha answered sturdily. 'He wouldn't have obtruded his own affairs without due cause upon anybody. Though he's gentleman enough, if it comes to that, to be rather proud than ashamed of his business. But as to his being a gentleman by birth and position, so he is, too. I don't know much about his history—he's an awfully reticent man—but I know he's a person of very good family, and all that sort of thing, and has taken to photography partly from love of it, and partly because he'd lost by an unexpected reverse the greater part of his fortune.'

Lady Beaumont mused, and toyed nervously with the quizzing-glass.

'Well, of course, these are topsy-turvy

times,' she said, nodding, with a candid air of acquiescence. 'One never knows what odd trade a gentleman born may take to nowadays. Lord Archibald Macnab's in a tea-broker's in the City, I'm told; Lady Browne keeps a bonnet-shop; and I went into an upholsterer's in Oxford Street the other day, and only learnt afterwards that the person who owns it, and sells pots and pans and wall-papers, is an Oxford man and a poet. . . . Still, I took Mr. Hayward, I must say, for something more than that—something *really* distinguished, don't you know. He has the manners of an Austrian count or an Italian prince. I should have thought him a foreigner, almost—though he speaks English perfectly—but a foreigner accustomed to the very highest society.'

'So he is,' Sacha retorted once more, as stoutly as ever. No country baronet's wife should shake her allegiance to the Bond Street photographer. 'Not a foreigner, I

don't mean, for he's an Englishman born, he tells me, but accustomed to mixing with the best people everywhere.'

'Not a foreigner?' Lady Beaumont repeated, rolling the words on her tongue with an interrogative quiver. 'Such stately manners as his are so rare in England. We should think them too *empressés*. And how he trills his *r*'s, too! Have you noticed that trick of his? He says R'rome, per'rhaps, Sor'r'ento, char'rming.'

'He lived a good deal abroad as a boy, I believe,' Sacha answered, in the tone of one not anxious to continue the subject. 'He was partly brought up in Sweden, if I remember right; and he caught the trilled *r* there, and has never got over it since. But his English in all other ways is as good as yours and mine is.' She might truthfully have added, as far as Lady Beaumont was concerned, 'and a great deal better, too'; but she was prudent, and restrained herself.

When a man sees there's any subject you don't want to talk about, he avoids it instinctively, as a natural point of good manners. When a woman sees the same thing her curiosity's aroused at once, and she compels you to go on with it exactly in proportion as she finds you desire to evade her questions. Lady Beaumont saw Sacha didn't want to talk about Mr. Hayward, so, of course, she pressed her hard with more direct inquiries. That's what's known as feminine tact.

'He's your brother's guardian,' she said musingly, after a moment's pause. 'I suppose, then, he was a very great friend of your poor father's?'

Sacha winced almost imperceptibly, but Lady Beaumont was aware of it.

'Not exactly his guardian,' the girl answered, after a short internal conflict. 'Not by my father's will, that is to say. He felt an interest in Owen, on poor papa's

account, and he's done what he could for him ever since, so we *call* him his guardian.'

'Oh, indeed! Is he rich?' Point-blank at Sacha's head, as only a woman of good society would dare to pose the question.

'I don't know; he never showed me his income-tax return. I should say that was a question entirely between himself and the Commissioners of Inland Revenue.'

It was straight from the shoulder, as Sacha knew how to hit. But Lady Beaumont sat still and took it smiling, not being quick enough or agile enough, indeed, to dodge it lightly.

'Well, does he *seem* rich, then?' she persisted, as unperturbed as if Sacha were charmed with her conversation. 'Does he spend money freely? Does he live well and handsomely?'

'He spends very little on himself, I should say,' Sacha answered somewhat curtly, 'and a great deal upon other people. But he's

not a communicative man. If you want to know all about him, why not ask him direct? You did, you know, about the photographer's shop in Bond Street.'

Lady Beaumont looked up at her with a face of impassive scrutiny. For so young a woman, this painting girl was really most self-possessed. But the county member's wife was not to be sat upon by an artist, however large and well built.

'Owen's going into the diplomatic service, I think Miss Cazalet told me,' she began again after a strategic pause.

'Into the diplomatic service. Yes. If he can get in,' Sacha admitted grudgingly, for she hated to let out any further information.

Lady Beaumont poked her parasol into the turf at her feet, and egged out a root of grass or two in a meditative fashion.

'It's a curious service for a young man to go in for, unless he's really rich, or at the very least has expectations in the future,' she

remarked in the air, abstractedly. 'They get no pay at all, you know, for the first two or three years, and they must spend more as *attachés* than their salary amounts to.'

'So I believe,' Sacha replied, without moving a muscle of that handsome round face of hers. 'It's a service for rich young men I've always been given to understand. A career, not a livelihood. Honour and glory, not filthy lucre.'

'Then, why does Owen go in for it?' Lady Beaumont asked, straight out, with that persistent inquisitiveness which some women of the world think so perfectly becoming.

'I don't know,' Sacha replied. 'He is of age. Ask him. Perhaps it may be because Mr. Hayward wishes it.'

'Oh!' Lady Beaumont said shortly.

She'd got what she wanted now. A rich relation, no doubt, of whom they were all

ashamed, and whose money they expected to get, while disowning his business.

The talk glided off by degrees into other channels. By-and-by Aunt Julia and Mr. Hayward returned. They brought with them a third person—that Brazilian from Bahia with the very curly hair, who was stopping with the Fergussons at Ashley Towers. Mr. Hayward was discoursing with him in very fluent French. At that Lady Beaumont pricked her ears up to hear what he said. She couldn't follow it all—her ear for spoken French was still a trifle untrained; but she heard a good deal, and took the rest in instinctively (which is why women learn languages so much quicker than men). 'Perfectly, monsieur,' the mysterious photographer was remarking in that clear, bell-like voice of his. 'This is an age of *trains de luxe*. To live in the world to-day you must follow the world as it flits across four flying continents. It's a common

British mistake of ours to suppose the universe stops short at the English Channel. Error, error, error! It even extends beyond Paris and Switzerland. Most Englishmen fancy they know the world if they know London, Brighton, Ascot, Scarborough, and Newmarket. For my part, M. le Conte, early acquaintance with the Continent saved me, happily, from that inexact idea. I know that if you want to keep up with the movement you must march with it as it marches at Vichy to-day, at Baden-Baden to-morrow, at Nice, Monte Carlo, Pau, Carlsbad, the next day. So I took the hint and followed up your ex-Emperor from Cannes to Algiers, till I caught him at last on the slope of Mustapha Supérieur.' The rest she couldn't hear. It was but a passing snatch as he strolled by her chair. But it was enough, at least, to impress Lady Beaumont profoundly with a sense of Mr. Hayward's prodigious mastery of col-

loquial French, and astonishing ease in framing his thoughts into words in all languages equally.

Was he a Frenchman, then, she wondered, and was that why his *r*'s had that peculiar trill in them?

To be sure, an acute Parisian ear (like yours and mine, dear reader) might have noticed at once that, as in English Mr. Hayward trilled his *r*'s, so in French his *an*'s, his *en*'s, and his *on*'s, were very ill distinguished. But, then, Lady Beaumont hadn't had *our* educational advantages. To her dull English ear his spoken French was exactly a Frenchman's.

As she sat and pondered, Owen strolled up to the group, looking glorious in his running clothes—a young Greek god, hot and flushed from his victories. Even on Sacha's placid face a ruddy spot of pleasure glowed bright as her brother drew near, like a statue come to life; while, as for

Mr. Hayward, he stepped forward to meet the hero of the day with such graceful cordiality as a prince might show to one of his noblest subjects.

‘My dear boy,’ he said, laying his hand on the young man’s shoulder with a half-caressing movement, ‘you won that mile splendidly. ’Twas a magnificent spurt. I was proud of you as I looked at you, Owen—very proud of you as I looked at you.’

Lady Beaumont’s steely eyes were turned on the pair, watching warily.

‘Thank you, Mr. Hayward,’ the young man answered in a modest tone, but with genuine pleasure, as an affectionate boy might answer his father. ‘If you’re pleased, that’s all I want; but I hope you didn’t mind my not meeting you at the station?’

‘Mind!’ Mr. Hayward repeated quickly. ‘Mind! Why, I should have been most grieved, my boy, if you’d missed one fraction of these sports on my account. But Sacha

knew best. One can always trust Sacha; she explained to me when we met, and I agreed with her entirely. To see you win such a magnificent lot of prizes as this is all I ask of you.'

'But his work?' Aunt Julia suggested, aghast—'his books, his reading, Mr. Hayward? Don't you think these things tend to unsettle a young man for examinations?'

Mr. Hayward turned round and gazed blandly and benignly at her.

'I should have read Owen's character very ill indeed,' he said with a curious smile, 'if I thought anything could unsettle him from a resolve once made. He's true as steel, is Owen. If you want men to do well, first begin by trusting them. That's the freeman's way. The other is both the curse and the Nemesis of despotism.'

'What a very odd man!' Lady Beaumont thought to herself; 'and how sententiously he spoke! What a bore, too, if you saw

much of him !' For women of Lady Beaumont's type invariably think anybody a dreadful bore who makes a generalized remark, or who talks about anything else in heaven or earth but the gossip of the narrow little set they mix in.

CHAPTER IV.

DIPLOMATIC DISCIPLINE.

AN hour or two later they were taking tea together in Sacha's sacred studio, at the round table made out of the Cairene wood-work stand, surmounted by the old Moorish chased brass tray that Mr. Hayward had brought her on one of his voyages to Tunis.

The treasures of the household, indeed, had been ransacked to do honour to Mr. Hayward. Aunt Julia had brought out the best silver teapot with the Cazalet arms on it, and the George III. apostle spoons that belonged to her grandmother fifty years ago in Devonshire. Cook had produced some of

her famous brown rolls, and had surpassed her well-known skill in the home-made rusks and buttered Canadian tea-cake. Martha's little French cap was crimped and starched with unwonted care, and her apron with the white lace was even more spotless than usual. Sacha herself had put the very daintiest of her sketches on the easel by the square bay-window, and festooned fresh sprays of trailing clematis and long stems of wild bryony from the Venetian bowl in hammered copper that hung by a wrought-iron chain from a staple in the corner. The studio, in short, was as picturesque as Sacha knew how to make it; for Mr. Hayward's visits were few and far between, and all the household made the more of them for the rarity of their occurrence.

Yet a certain visible constraint brooded over the whole party none the less while they drank their tea out of Sacha's Satsuma cups; for it was an understood thing that

Mr. Hayward never came down to Moor Hill except for some good and sufficient reason; and what that reason might be nobody liked to ask him, though, till he chose to disclose it himself, they sat on tenterhooks of painful expectation.

At last, however, Mr. Hayward laid down his cup, and turned for a moment to Owen.

‘And now, my boy,’ he said quietly, as though everybody knew beforehand the plan he was going to propose, ‘will you be ready to set out with me to-morrow morning?’

‘Certainly,’ Owen answered at once, with a great air of alacrity. ‘To-night, if you like. I can go and pack my portmanteau this minute, if necessary, or start without it.’

Mr. Hayward smiled approval.

‘That’s right,’ he said, nodding assent. ‘Quite right, as far as it goes, and shows promptitude in some ways. I’d half a mind

to telegraph to you yesterday to come up then and there, just to test your obedience. But I'm glad now I didn't. It would have grieved me to have done you out of this morning's triumphs. This is all so good for you.'

'If you had,' Owen said simply, 'I'd have come straight up, of course, though it *would* have been a wrench, I don't deny. But it's wrenches, after all, that are the true test of discipline.'

Mr. Hayward smiled once more.

'Quite so,' he answered, with evident pleasure. 'You're a good boy, Owen—a boy after my own heart. And in most things I approve of you. But remember, *point de zèle*. Zeal often spoils everything. That was unnecessary that you said just now, "to-night, if you like"; nobody asked you to go to-night. I said to-morrow morning. A well-trained subordinate answers, "Certainly; at what hour?" but never suggests to-night.'

That's no part of his province.' He paused for a moment, and gazed hard with searching eyes at Sacha. 'These things are important,' he added, musing, 'as disciplinary preparation for the diplomatic service.'

'I'll remember it, Mr. Hayward,' Owen answered submissively.

'For the diplomatic service,' Mr. Hayward went on, 'a man needs for the most part not zeal, but discretion. Zealous subordinates you can find any day in the streets by the dozen; a discreet one you may search for over two-thirds of Europe. Obedience you've learnt already, my boy; discretion you've got to learn now. No offering to go and pack your portmanteau at once—it isn't demanded of you—still less, protestations of willingness to start without one.'

He spoke austerely, but kindly, with a tender, fatherly ring in his voice, like one who would correct a fault without giving needless pain to the pupil.

'I see,' Owen answered, abashed. 'I was wrong, of course. I ought to have gone without a portmanteau at once, if you summoned me; but not have effusively offered to go without one when I wasn't called upon to do so.'

Mr. Hayward's eyes sparkled with suppressed pride and pleasure. A very apt pupil, this, quick to accept reproof where he saw it was deserved, and to mend his ways accordingly.

He laid that friendly hand upon the young man's shoulder again.

'Quite right, Owen,' he said. 'You'll make a diplomat yet! . . . We shall see him ambassador at Constantinople before we die, Miss Cazalet. . . . But you haven't asked yet where you're to go to, my boy. Don't you want to know about it?'

Owen hesitated a moment.

'I thought discretion dictated that I should wait till I was told,' he answered, after a long

pause, during which Sacha's eyes were fixed firmly upon him.

The Bond Street photographer smiled that strange smile of success and satisfaction once more.

'Right again, my boy,' he said, well pleased. 'You answer as you ought to do. Then you shall know your destination to-morrow evening.'

Aunt Julia gave a little start of surprise and regret.

'But aren't we to know where he's going, Mr. Hayward?' she cried. 'Aren't we to know where we can write to him?'

Mr. Hayward turned round upon her with a coldly contemptuous look in his keen brown eyes. His manner towards Aunt Julia was always markedly different from his manner to Owen and Sacha. Its stately courtesy never quite succeeded in concealing the undercurrent of contempt for the district visitor within her.

‘It was in our bargain,’ he said, ‘Miss Cazalet—which Owen, at least, has always loyally kept—that I might take him for a month at a time, twice a year, when I chose, to live with me, or travel with me wherever I liked, in order to retain such a hold as I desired both over his education and over his character and affections. It was never specified that I should tell you beforehand when or where it suited me he should pass those two months with me. It was only arranged that at the end of each such holiday I should restore him once more to your own safe keeping. Two months out of twelve is surely not excessive for me to ask for myself, especially as Owen is happiest when he’s away on his trips with me.’

The tears came up into Aunt Julia’s eyes. Long since she had repented of that most doubtful bargain. She even wondered at times whether Mr. Hayward was some modern embodiment of Mephistopheles, and

whether she had sold Owen's soul to him, as Esau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. It frightened her when she heard him talk so much of running about Europe in *trains de luxe*. It reminded her always of the Book of Job, and of the high personage who presented himself at the court of heaven 'from going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it.'

'I should certainly have liked to know where Owen was likely to be,' Aunt Julia murmured, struggling hard with her voice and her tears. 'It's a pull to give him up without even knowing where he's gone to.'

Owen turned to her tenderly.

'Well, but, auntie,' he said in his manly voice, always full of English cheeriness, 'you know I won't get into any harm with Mr. Hayward; and for myself, I really like best the element of adventure and surprise—the never knowing till I get there where it is I'm going to.'

The love of adventure and surprise, however, is poorly developed in the British old maid or in the British matron. But Mr. Hayward had carried his point, and could afford to relent now.

‘Go upstairs, Owen,’ he said, ‘and put your things together at once. I’m not sure, after all, I won’t start off this evening.’

‘And we’ve got dinner for you, and everything!’ Aunt Julia exclaimed appealingly. She’d made a cream pudding. Her housewifely heart was stirred to its depth by this bitter disappointment.

But Owen ran upstairs with cheerful promptitude. It was clear Mr. Hayward had a very firm hold over him—a hold gained not so much by command as by affection. As soon as he was gone their visitor closed the door behind him.

‘Miss Cazalet,’ he said in that clear and very musical voice of his, ‘I’ve never been unreasonable. I made a bargain with you

and Owen for Owen's clear advantage, but I've never abused it. While he was at school I took care not to break in upon his terms; I even allowed his schooling to take precedence of his education; I only claimed him in the holidays, and then he learned more from me in those two short months than in the other ten from his books and his masters. Since he left school I've been more irregular, but always for a good reason. I've a good reason now, though I don't choose to communicate it. However, I don't mind telling you privately where I'm going, if you and Alexandra—I beg your pardon, my child, Sacha I mean—won't mention it to Owen before we start. . . . I'm contemplating a month's tour in the mountains of Morocco.'

Aunt Julia drew a deep breath of relief. She knew nothing about Morocco, to be sure, except the bare name; and she had a vague idea that the majority of its inhabitants were engaged in the book-binding trade and

the exportation of leather; but it was a comfort to her, all the same, to know exactly on the map where Owen was going to.

‘Morocco,’ she reflected, much consoled. ‘Morocco. Morocco. And shall we be able to write to him while he’s gone? Will you give us your address there?’

‘There will be *no* address,’ Mr. Hayward answered curtly. ‘No addresses of any sort.’

‘Not even *poste restante*?’ Aunt Julia interposed.

Mr. Hayward smiled, a broad smile.

‘Not even *poste restante*,’ he replied, unbending at the bare idea. ‘We shall be up in the mountains all the time, among pathless wilds and in small native villages. Posts are unknown, and inns of any sort unheard of. I want to do some photography of the untouched Moorish world, so I shall make at once for the remotest interior.’

‘Owen will like that!’ Saccha put in, well

pleased. 'It'll exactly suit him. There'll be mountain-climbing, of course, and, as he says, an element of excitement and adventure?'

'Precisely,' Mr. Hayward answered; 'just why I'm taking him there. I want to train his body and mind to familiarity with danger. Your father was a brave man, Sacha. I want Owen to be like him.'

'Owen is,' Sacha said proudly. 'As brave as they're made. He takes after his father in that. Or else your training's been successful.'

'Well, it's a comfort to think, anyhow, that if anything goes wrong in Morocco while he's there,' Aunt Julia said with a sigh, 'we shall know at least that dear Owen's in the midst of it.' Which is a feminine form of delight, but a very common one.

CHAPTER V.

‘CHERCHEZ LA FEMME.’

GUARDIAN and ward stood on the deck of a Cunard Mediterranean liner before Owen had an inkling of their real destination. This uncertainty, indeed, exactly suited his adventurous athlete mind. He liked to set out not knowing whither he was bound, and to wake up some fine morning in a new world of wonders. Overflowing with life and youth and health and spirits, he found in such a tourist surprise party an irresistible attraction. He was wafted to his Bagdad as on some enchanted carpet. It would have spoilt half the fun for him if he knew beforehand where he was going, or why;

and, besides, with Mr. Hayward he was always happy. He preferred this sailing under sealed orders.

Oh, the change to him, since boyhood upwards, from Aunt Julia's petticoat *régime* and perpetual old-maidish restraint at the Red Cottage to the freedom and breeziness of Mr. Hayward's holiday! For Mr. Hayward had designed it so, and had succeeded admirably. A boy hates to live under a woman's restrictions, and loves to have a man in authority over him. Mr. Hayward took advantage of that natural instinct of boy psychology to bind Owen to himself by strong ties of affection and gratitude. With Aunt Julia, education was one long categorical 'Don't'; her sole part of speech was the imperative negative. Don't try to climb trees; don't speak in that voice; don't play with those rude boys; don't wear out your shoes, or the knees of your knickerbockers.

With Mr. Hayward, on the contrary,

education consisted in a constant endeavour to find out and encourage every native instinct. If that pleases you, my boy, why, do it by all means; if that irks you, never mind: you can get on in the end very well without it. From Mr. Hayward, or with Mr. Hayward, Owen had learnt French at odd times without being conscious of learning it; he had learnt history and politics, and knowledge of common things; optics and photography, and all the allied arts and sciences; geography in action; a mass of general information taken in at the pores, and all the more valuable because acquired *con amore*. That was what Mr. Hayward meant by 'not allowing his schooling to interfere with his education.' The boy had learnt most and learnt best in his holidays.

Obedience, if you will; yes, Mr. Hayward desired the promptest obedience. But it was the willing obedience the disciple renders of his own accord to the master

he adores, not the slavish obedience a broken spirit tenders to a despotic martinet. Liberty first, order afterwards. Mr. Hayward would rather ten thousand times see Owen rebel than see him give in without a struggle to unreasonable authority. As a matter of fact, Owen often rebelled against Aunt Julia's strict rules; and when he did so Mr. Hayward upheld him in it stoutly.

On this particular journey, even after they got outside the bar of the Mersey, Owen had still no idea whither on earth they were bound, save that their destination was somewhere in the Mediterranean. He learnt the exact place by accident. A fellow-passenger, leaning over the taffrail, asked Mr. Hayward carelessly, 'Alexandria?'

'No, Tangier,' the mysterious man answered. 'My friend and I are going on a tour in the Morocco mountains. I want to do a little photography there—take un-hackneyed Islam.'

Owen's heart leapt up at the sound, but he gave no overt token. Mountaineering in Morocco! How delightful! How romantic! Arabs, Atlas, adventure! The very thing to suit him.

'Dangerous work,' the fellow-passenger observed with a languid yawn—'sketching and photographing. Shock these fellows' religious prejudices; and Jedburgh justice is the rule. "Off with his head," says the Cadi.'

'So I hear,' Mr. Hayward answered calmly. 'They tell me you mustn't try to take a snap at a mosque, in particular, unless you can do it unobserved. If the natives catch you at it, they're pretty sure to resent the insult to their religion, and cut your throat as a work of unobtrusive piety.'

'What larks!' Owen thought to himself. 'This is just what I love. A spice of danger thrown in! And I've always heard the Morocco people are fanatical Mohammedans.'

And, indeed, he enjoyed his first week or two on African soil immensely. From the moment he set foot in Tangier—that tangled Tangier—he found himself at once in a fairy-land of marvels. More Eastern than the East, Morocco still remains free from the vulgarizing admixture of a foreign element, which spoils Algiers and Cairo and Constantinople. But Owen had never touched on Islam at all before ; and this sudden dip into pure Orient at one plunge was to him a unique and glorious experience. He was sorry to tear himself away from the picturesque narrow alleys and turbaned Moors of Tangier even for the promised delights of the wild interior. But Mr. Hayward's arrangements for his tour in the Atlas were soon completed ; the protection of the Shereefian umbrella was granted in due form, and they set out, after three days, for the mountains of the back country.

Owen was not at all surprised to find, as

they journeyed inland, that Mr. Hayward spoke Arabic fluently. On the contrary, it would have astonished him much more if his guardian had proved ignorant of any known language, Oriental or Western. Mr. Hayward chatted easily with their Moorish escort, a soldier of the Sultan's, as they marched along single file, each mounted on a good native saddle-horse, through the narrow bridle-paths which constitute the sole roads in Morocco. The British Consul at Tangier had procured them the services of an official escort, and had further supplied them with a firman from his Shereefian Majesty, enjoining on all and sundry to show them on their way every respect and kindness. Travelling was safe in the interior just now, the escort assured them; for, Allah be praised! the Sultan's health was excellent. When the Sultan was ill, of course it was very different; things got unsettled up country then, and it was dangerous

for foreigners to venture too far from the coast and their consuls. In Ramadan, too, during the month of fasting, Europeans found it risky to travel about freely. The faithful of the town got crusty with their enforced abstinence, and their religious feelings were deeply stirred at that time; they let them loose, the escort remarked with engaging frankness, on the passing infidels. Up country, you see, the people are so little accustomed to foreign effendis. At Tangier we are more civilized; we have learned to make trade with them.

It had been hot at Tangier, for it was full summer in England; but up on the high mountains of the interior they found the season cool, with a spring-like freshness. Owen never enjoyed anything better than that free, wild life, climbing crags through the long day, camping out in quaint Berber huts through the short nights, with none but natives and their cattle for society.

And the danger gave it zest, for, in spite of the Sultan's firman, they could only photograph by stealth or under constant peril of angry and hostile expostulation.

About their fifth evening out from Tangier, an hour before sunset, as they were sitting in the courtyard of a rude native inn at a place called Ain-Essa, where they proposed to pass the night as guests of the village, they were surprised by the approach of a pair of travellers in the costume of the country. One was a handsome young man in an embroidered Moorish jacket and loose white trousers, wearing a fez on his head, around which protruded great fluffy masses of luxuriant chestnut hair, reminding one somewhat of the cinque-cento Florentines. Though not more than the middle height, the stranger yet looked tall and well made, and Owen remarked at once with a professional eye that he had in him the makings of a very tolerable athlete. The other, who

seemed his servant, was an older and heavily-bearded man, clad in the common green coat and dirty white turban of the Moorish groom or stable-boy.

The younger traveller of the two jumped from his horse very lightly; he rode well, and sprang with ease, like an accomplished gymnast. As he flung his reins to his servant, he said in decent French :

‘*Tiens*, take my horse, Ali; I’ll go into the *auberge*, and see if they can give us accommodation this evening.’

The sound of a European tongue in that remote mountain village took Mr. Hayward aback. He rose from the divan where he sat, and, lifting his hat to the young man, crossed over to the servant, while the new-comer, with easy assurance, strolled into the front-room of the native inn.

‘*Monsieur est Français ?*’ he asked the man who had been addressed as Ali.

The Arab shook his head.

‘Non, Anglaise,’ he answered curtly.

‘Anglais?’ Mr. Hayward corrected, thinking Ali’s command of French didn’t extend as far as genders, and that he had substituted the feminine for the masculine in error.

But Ali was not to be shaken so lightly from his first true report.

‘Non, non,’ he repeated, ‘Anglaise, vous dis-je; Anglaise, Anglaise, Anglaise. It’s a woman, not a man. It pleases her to ride about through the interior that way.’

Owen looked up quite crestfallen.

‘You don’t mean to say she travels alone, without an escort, with nobody to take care of her except you?’ he asked the man in French.

The Algerian—for he was one—nodded a quiet assent.

‘’Tis mademoiselle’s fancy,’ he said; ‘she likes to go her own way. And she goes it, I can tell you. Nobody would ever get

mademoiselle to do anything she didn't want to.'

Owen gazed appealingly at his guardian.

'This is too bad, Mr. Hayward!' he cried. 'We've a soldier to protect us, and a girl goes alone. We must dismiss our escort. It's a shame for us to be beaten like that by a woman.'

'You're quite right,' Mr. Hayward answered. 'If she can go alone, why, so can we. I'll dismiss our man to-morrow, and I'm glad you took it so.'

In a few minutes more the stranger strolled out casually into the courtyard again. She had a frank, free face, yet not really masculine, when one came to look into it, and the great crop of loose chestnut hair, blowing about it in the breeze, gave it a very marked air of loose grace and carelessness.

'I beg your pardon,' she said in pure English, her voice betraying at once the

open secret of her sex, 'but I hear from the man who keeps this place you've got his only two rooms. I'm sorry to interfere with you, but would you mind occupying one together, just this evening, to let me have the other? It's a long pull at this hour of night to Taourist, the next station.'

She spoke as calmly and familiarly as if she were in an English hotel, and as if a lady got up in male Arab costume were everywhere a common object of the country. Mr. Hayward glanced at her and smiled, raising his hat the while with his usual stately courtesy.

'With pleasure,' he said, motioning her to a seat on the divan by the door. 'If there's anything at all we can do for you we shall be only too happy. You're English, of course, as I gather from your accent.'

The problematical young person took a seat on the divan in the shade, and removed her fez for coolness, displaying as she did

so all the wealth of chestnut hair that had before been but vaguely suspected by the fringe that escaped from it.

‘More English than anything else, I suppose,’ she said brightly, leaning back as she spoke and loosening her native slippers, ‘though I haven’t a drop of English blood in my body, if it comes to that; but I’m a British subject, any way, and my native tongue’s English. I’m a little bit of everything, I believe—except Turk, thank heaven!—but my name’s mostly Greek; it’s Ionê Dracopoli.’

‘A very pretty name, too,’ Owen put in, half abashed. ‘My friend’s is Hayward, and mine’s Owen Cazalet.’

‘Why, then, you must be Sacha’s brother!’ Miss Dracopoli cried, enchanted. ‘You are? How delightful! Sacha and I used to go to the School of Art together. You never heard her speak of me, did you—Ionê Dracopoli?’

'No, never,' Owen answered. 'But she knows so many girls in London, of course,' he added apologetically. 'You don't mean to say you're travelling alone in Morocco like this? You've come all the way from Tangier with nobody but this servant?'

'Not from Tangier,' Miss Ionê answered, enjoying his amazement immensely; 'much further than that. All the way from Oran, in French Algeria. Yes, I've ridden across the mountains on my own hired horse, just with Ali to take care of me. The French people at Oran talked a pack of nonsense about its being impossible for anybody to get along beyond the frontier without an escort. "Very well, then," said I to the *sous-prefet* or somebody—a fat, smiling old gentleman with a red ribbon in his button-hole and a perfect genius for shrugging his shoulders and saying, "Mais, non, mademoiselle; impossible"—"I never care to attempt anything myself unless it's impossible. What's

possible's easy. What's impossible's amusing." He shrugged his shoulders again, and said, "Another of these mad English. Thank heaven, if she's killed it'll be beyond the frontier." But he let me go, all the same.' And Ionê smiled, triumphant at the memory of the encounter.

'And you've had no difficulties by the way?' Mr. Hayward asked, astonished.

Ionê threw her head back and showed a very pretty neck. Her face was daintily rounded, and her teeth, when she smiled, were two rows of pure ivory.

'Difficulties?' she echoed. 'Difficulties? Dear me, yes; thank goodness I've had nothing but difficulties. Why, what else do you expect? Where'd be the fun of coming so far and facing so much discomfort, I should like to know, if it were all plain sailing, like a canter across the Brighton downs? It was the difficulties that drew me, and I've not been disappointed.'

Owen stared hard at her, and listened with profound interest and admiration. Mr. Hayward, gazing alarmed, noted the sparkle in his eye. This was indeed a girl after Owen's own heart, he felt sure. So he registered a solemn resolution in his own mind to find out that night which way Miss Dracopoli was going on the morrow, and to start himself on the opposite one. For there's nothing more likely to turn a man from any fixed resolve in life than that first stumbling-block of our race, from Adam downward—a woman. And Mr. Hayward had far other designs in his head for Owen Cazalet than to let him fall a victim betimes to any Ionê Dracopoli.

CHAPTER VI.

A CRITICAL EVENING.

THEY sat there some time and talked, the pretty stranger in the Moorish costume detailing to them meanwhile in further outline her chief adventures by the way—how she'd been refused at every native hut in the village here, and made to sleep in the open air, under the fig-trees, there, and turned away altogether from whole tribal lands elsewhere. It was a curious eventful tale, and once or twice it grew exciting; but Miss Ionê herself, overflowing with youthful spirits, told it all, from the humorous side, as a capital joke, and now and again made them laugh heartily by the quaint drollness of her comments.

At the end of it all she rose, quite unabashed and untroubled by her wide Turkish trousers, and, with an airy wave of the hand, observed:

‘I must go inside now, and see what our landlord can do for me in the way of supper. I’m hot and dusty with my ride. I must have a good wash. There’s nothing on earth so delicious, after all, when you’ve got beyond the Southern limit of tubs, as a big bowl of cold water at the end of a long day’s journey.’

As soon as she was gone Mr. Hayward looked at Owen.

‘Well?’ he said slowly.

‘Well?’ Owen answered, perusing his boots.

‘What do you think of her?’ Mr. Hayward asked, trembling.

‘She’s certainly pretty,’ Owen admitted, hot and red.

And neither said a word more. But Mr.

Hayward felt an unwonted thrill of premonitory discomfiture.

Half an hour later, Ionê emerged again. She had taken off her embroidered jacket meanwhile, and now displayed underneath it a sort of loose white shirt, of some soft silky material, which gave her a more feminine air, and showed off to greater advantage that full, smooth, snowy neck of hers. Her short but flowing hair rippled gracefully round her temples. She came out to them, trilling to herself a few bars of a joyous French song, 'C'est ça-tarra-larra.'

'Well, this is better,' she cried, looking around at the pink glow of the Southern sunset on the bare whitewashed walls, and shaking her locks free from her forehead on the faint mountain breeze. 'I'm cool again now. They'll give us something to eat out here before long, I suppose. Better here than in that stuffy little living-room inside. I'm not particular as to furniture, or

food either, thank goodness! but fresh air seems to come rather expensive in Morocco.'

She was like fresh air herself, Owen felt instinctively. Something so open and breezy about her face, her voice, her walk, her manner. The ideal of young Hellas come to life again by a miracle in our workaday, modern, industrial world. She looked as if no taint of this sordid civilization of ours had ever stained or sullied her Greek Naiad nature.

'I've asked them to serve us what they can in the open court,' Mr. Hayward said dubiously. 'You're used to their fare by this time, no doubt, so I won't apologize for it.'

'I should think so!' the girl answered, pulling her shirt loose as she spoke, with another sunny smile. 'Very good fare, too, in its way, though not luxurious: dried figs and milk, and olive-oil, and cous-cous. It's such a comfort to feel one's left fish-knives

and doilies altogether behind one, and that there isn't a pair of asparagus-tongs anywhere nearer than Oran.'

'Perhaps,' Owen began, rising from his seat, and looking timidly towards Mr. Hayward, 'Miss Dracopoli would prefer——'

'I beg your pardon,' their new acquaintance put in quickly, interrupting him, 'I'm not Miss Dracopoli. I object to these meaningless pure courtesy titles. My name's Ionê.'

'But I can't say Ionê to a lady I never met in my life before to-night,' Owen responded, almost blushing.

'Why not?' the pretty stranger answered, with most engaging frankness, 'especially as you'll most likely never see me again in your life, after to-morrow.'

Mr. Hayward looked up sharply. He was glad to hear that welcome suggestion.

But Owen only bowed, and received the hint in regretful silence.

'Well, if I were a man, you see,' Ionê went

on, composing herself on the divan in Owen's place, with her feet under her, Oriental fashion, 'I'd get other men, of course, to call me Dracopoli. But a girl can't quite do that. It's unfeminine, and women, I think, should always be womanly; so the only way out of it is to say, frankly, Ionê.'

'So universal a privilege is the less likely to be highly prized,' Mr. Hayward said sententiously.

'Exactly,' Ionê answered, leaning forward, all alert, and opening her palms before her demonstratively. 'That's just the point of it, don't you see? It prevents stupid nonsense. I'm all for social freedom myself; and social freedom we girls can only get when women insist in general society upon being accepted as citizens, not as merely women. What I've always held about our future——'

But before she could get any further in her voluble harangue the landlord of the little inn, if one may venture to give the village

guest-house such a dignified name, appeared in the court with the single tray which contained their dinner.

He was the *amine*, or headman of the little mountain community, and after serving the meal he and his friends stood by, as native politeness demands, not to partake of the food, but to do honour to their guests, and to enliven them with conversation.

From the talk that ensued, Owen, who, of course, spoke no Arabic, was wholly cut off; but Mr. Hayward and Ionê chatted away complacently. Every now and again, too, the *amine* would take up some cous-cous, or a morsel of roast kid, in his dusky fingers, and, as a special mark of distinguished consideration, thrust it bodily into their mouths—the Oriental equivalent for ‘Do let me tempt you with another slice of turkey.’

Owen felt it a hard trial of his courtesy to gulp down these greasy morsels from those doubtfully washen hands; but he noticed

with admiration that Ionê Dracopoli received them all with every outward expression of appreciation and delight, and he marvelled much himself at the young lady's adaptiveness.

‘What a power of accommodating yourself to circumstances you must have!’ he cried at last to her, in an unobtrusive aside. ‘I can’t put on a smiling face at those great greasy boluses of his. How on earth do you manage it?’

Ionê laughed lightly.

‘Habit, I suppose,’ she answered, with a sunny glance at the *amine*. ‘That’s how I rub along so well with these half-barbarous people. I’m accustomed to giving way to their crude native ideas, and so I seldom get into any serious bothers with them; and though I travel alone, they never dream of insulting me, even if they’re a bit churlish or suspicious sometimes. And then, besides, I dare say, my ancestry counts for a great deal.

I'm not so particular about my food, you see, as most regular English people. Even at my father's table in London we always had black olives, and caviare, and all sorts of queer Greek dishes—nasty sloppy messes our visitors called them, much like this *pillau*; but I was brought up on them, and I liked them.'

'And then you speak Arabic so well,' Owen went on enthusiastically. 'That's the Greek in you again, I suppose? Can you speak many languages? Most Eastern Europeans have such a natural taste for them.'

'Oh yes, pretty well,' Ionê replied, with the careless air of a person who describes some unimportant accomplishment. 'English, and French, and German, of course; those come by nature—one hears everybody speaking them; and then modern Greek—papa's business friends always spoke that in the house, and we picked it up unconsciously;

and ancient Greek—papa liked us to know enough, you see, to read the New Testament and follow the service at church. Papa was orthodox, of course, and we went to Petersburg Place; and it was such fun to spell out Herodotus and Aristophanes and Æschylus. Men think you're clever; though, when you speak modern Greek fluently, you know, it isn't the least bit hard to pick out the sense of Thucydides and Plato; but I'm not learned, you must understand. I've only skimmed them through, just as I'd skim Shakespeare, or a French novel, or Dante's Inferno.'

And she helped herself to some curds with her fingers daintily.

'Then you know Italian, too?' Owen interposed, still more open-mouthed.

'To read, not to talk—that is to say, not well. But I'd soon pick it up if I was a week in the country. That's how I speak Arabic, as she is spoke, you know—no better. I took lessons for a fortnight at Oran before I started

from such a funny old Moor, with a French wife and three native ones; they boarded me in the harem, and we jib-jabbered together from morning to night, and I get along splendidly now. So would you if you took the trouble, and if you've a turn for languages.'

'I have,' Owen answered modestly. 'I suppose that runs always with East European blood.'

He paused and faltered, for, in the midst of the *amine's* conversation, Mr. Hayward's keen eyes had darted a warning glance at him. Then he went on more quickly, as if to cover the slip:

'Your father's dead, I gather, from what you say; but have you a mother living?'

'Oh dear, yes,' Ionê replied frankly, without a shade of false reserve. 'A dear old duck of a mother. She's Norse, my mother is, but orthodox—Greek Church, I mean, you know. Papa married her at Bergen, when

he was there in business, and she was received into the Church in London, after he was made a partner. That's why, though I'm practically English, I haven't a drop of English blood in my veins—thank Heaven! for I prefer to be original. I'm a cross between Nora Helmer and the Athenian of the age of Pericles, Sacha always tells me; and I'm proud of the mixture. Stay-at-home English people are so conventional—too Philistine, too afraid to trust their own wings. I'm not like that. I'm wild on freedom.'

And she shook her straggling locks again, standing out wavily on all sides, and let her full white shirt purse itself out as it would over her uncorseted bosom.

'So I should think,' Owen answered, with a slight twinkle in his eye, though he admired her boldness immensely. 'But does your mother'—'know you're out,' he was half tempted to add, though he restrained himself with an effort, and finished the sentence—

‘approve of your coming away all alone by yourself like this to Morocco?’

Ionê drew in her rich red lips with expression, and wiped them internally—since the feast knew no napkins.

‘I’m an Individualist,’ she said briskly; ‘above everything, an Individualist. I believe—it’s a simple creed—in personal freedom, and I’m lucky in having a mother who’s an Individualist too, and who shares my confession of faith. When I was coming here, I said to her, “Well, I’m going to Morocco.” “All right, dear,” she said; “alone?” “Yes, alone, mother.” “How ’ll you travel—on foot?” “No; if possible, on horseback.” “When do you start?” “To-morrow.” “Very well, dear; take care of yourself.” There’s a mother for you, if you like. I think I’ve reason to be proud of her. I’m not conceited, I hope, but I flatter myself I’ve brought up my mother splendidly.’

Mr. Hayward, glancing sideways, would

have given anything that moment to get rid of the *amine*. This conversation was terrible. It threatened instant ruin to all his best-laid plans. Was ever Owen confronted with such a dangerous pitfall? And he could do nothing, nothing to stop the full flow of this strange young woman's too attractive confidence.

He tried to draw her into conversation with the *amine*, but all to no purpose. Ionê was much more interestingly engaged elsewhere. She liked this young athlete with the great English limbs, who told her so modestly of his climbs among the mountains—a man after her own heart, and so handsome, too, and so appreciative. She rattled on with him by the hour, now narrating her own adventures, now drawing out his. Long after the meal was removed, and the *amine* had withdrawn gracefully to his evening devotions (with a curse for the infidels), she kept those two there up talking continuously

with her. Mr. Hayward himself, that heart of adamant, was hardly proof against her seductive charm. She was so frank, so adventurous, so bold, yet so innocent.

‘You mustn’t think ill of me,’ she said at last, ‘if I’ve talked like a woman all evening—and all about myself. I’ve a right to be garrulous. I’ve such arrears to make up—such arrears; oh, dreadful! Just consider, it’s five weeks to-day since I’ve met a Christian soul to talk to.’

Mr. Hayward stroked his chin and roped his big black moustache. The word Christian attracted him.

‘And are you Orthodox, then, yourself,’ he asked, ‘like your father and mother?’

Ionê laughed at the question.

‘Orthodox!’ she cried merrily, with a girlish toss of her pretty head—it was a true Greek head, oval, straight-nosed and round-faced—‘not in any sense of the word. I’m a Christian, I hope, in essentials, if that’s

what you want to ask ; but Orthodox, no no ! Not at all my line that. I'm just a concentrated bundle of all the heterodoxies.'

And with that final Parthian shot she nodded good-night to them both, and tripped gracefully away into the narrow doorway of the sleeping-room.

Before they retired for the night to roll themselves up in their own rugs on the smooth, mud-paved floor, Mr. Hayward whispered for a moment in a low voice to Owen.

'My boy,' he said, not angrily, but like one grieved and surprised, laying his hand on the young man's shoulder with that kindly paternal air of his, 'what a terrible slip about your East European blood ! It took my breath away to hear you. How on earth did you ever come to do it ?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' Owen answered, abashed and penitent. 'It slipped from me unawares. I suppose I was off my guard,

being so far from England. Mr. Hayward, you're too good! Don't look at me like that, but do scold me—do scold me for it. I'd give worlds if you'd scold me sometimes instead of taking things to heart so. Oh, how wrong of me—how silly! What can I do to show you how grieved and ashamed I am? . . . Dear friend, dear guardian, don't look at me like that. This time will be a warning to me. As long as I live, I promise you faithfully, I'll never do so again—never, never, never!

And, to do him justice, he kept his word faithfully.

CHAPTER VII.

A PHOTOGRAPHIC STUDY.

OWEN slept that evening much worse than usual. Not that the externals of his resting-place at Ain-Essa differed in any essential particular from those of the other squalid native huts where he'd spent every previous night since leaving Tangier. The dogs didn't bark louder, the jackals didn't whine in a more melancholy monotone, the fleas didn't bite with any livelier persistence, than in all the other sparse Berber villages on the slopes of Atlas. But Owen slept a great deal less than his wont, for all that; and the reason was—he was thinking of Ionê.

She was separated from him only by a thin wooden partition; for these native

North African guest-houses are far from luxurious. Indeed, it is the fashion to make a single building serve the double purpose of an inn and of the village cow-house. At one end of the guest-chamber rises a broad wooden platform, under which the mules and cattle are stabled, their heads projecting through an opening into the room one sleeps in. But to this arrangement, which carried his mind away at first to the inn at Bethlehem, Owen had by this time grown perfectly accustomed; what he hadn't grown accustomed to was Ionê's close proximity. For the room was divided transversely by a thin layer of pine planks; and through the chinks of the boards, as well as through the open space at the far end where the cattle were tethered, he could hear Ionê's deep breath, long and regular like a child's, rise and fall with each movement of that invisible bosom.

He thought much of Ionê, therefore, and

of the chance that had thrown them thus strangely together.

She'd come there for amusement, she said ; for amusement alone, and perhaps, when she got back, to write a book about it. If he'd read that book in London, it would have been nothing, nothing. But meeting Ionê out there, in the flesh, among the wild hills of Morocco, in her masculine attire and with her free English spirit—for, after all, it *was* English—she seemed to him more like some creature from the realms of fairyland : some Hellenic nymph, Oread or Dryad revived, in this alien world of woman-enslaving Islam.

Not that Ionê seemed to think much of her own exploit herself. It was that that put the finishing touch to her singular character. She talked as though it were quite a matter of course for a girl of nineteen to be travelling alone in man's clothes through the mountains of North Africa. A mere detail of convenience on an out-of-the-

way route. An accident of caprice. Owen admired her all the more for it.

But she must have money, too. That was bad. Or else how could she come such trips as this by herself? Owen didn't dream of marriage yet — he was only just turned twenty—but he had a prejudice against money, especially in a woman. Most wholesome-minded men would prefer to work for the girl of their choice themselves, and let her owe everything to them, rather than put up with a wife who could keep them or help them, and make them lose their sense of perfect independence.

At last he dozed off. Even so he slept but lightly. He was aware of the bite of each individual flea in all that populous room, and heard in his dreams the various droning notes of each responsive jackal.

Earlier than usual next morning Mr. Hayward waked him up with a gentle touch on his shoulder.

‘*Lève-toi,*’ he said in French, which they talked together oftener than not, for practice’ sake, on these holiday outings—thorough colloquial French is so useful for young men in the diplomatic service. ‘We must get under way pretty early this morning, or we shall sleep *à la belle étoile*. I’m thinking of a long stage. Dress quick, and come out to me.’

He didn’t say why; but Owen fancied he knew, for all that. Mr. Hayward was anxious to get well started on the road before Ionê was up, and in the opposite direction from the one she meant to go in.

In that hope, however, the wise guardian of youth was unexpectedly frustrated; for scarcely had they gone out into the cool courtyard from the stuffy room where they’d passed the night in their rugs amid the hot breath of the cattle, when a lively voice broke in upon them:

‘Good - morning, friends; good-morning.

Isn't it just stifling in there! I'm out half an hour before you.'

It was Ionê, sure enough, up and dressed betimes, in fez and white shirt, even prettier in the fresh morning air than last night after her journey. Did she always rise so early? Owen wondered to himself; or had she got up on purpose—he hardly dared to ask it of his own soul, for he had the modesty of a man—well, on purpose to say good-bye to them?

Ionê, however, didn't leave them long in doubt.

'Oh, Mr. Hayward,' she said, after a few minutes, in the most natural way possible, 'I wanted to see you before I went, just to ask you a favour. I wonder, now, if you'd photograph me? You said last night you'd a lens and all that sort of thing here with you, and I thought, if you didn't mind, it'd be so nice to be "took," as the servants say, in all my *chiffons* like this, got up in costume

as a regular Barbary barbarian. Of course, I *could* have it done, you know, just as well in London; only, it *wouldn't* be "just as well," but quite different altogether. If I went for it to Elliot and Fry's, or to Mortimer's in Bond Street, it'd be a cut-and-dried London cabinet portrait of a lady in a fancy dress—nothing more than that—no surroundings, no reality. But if I got it taken here, with the real live Atlas in the distance for a background, and the village and the Berbers for accessories on either side—well, suppose I should ever happen to make a book of all this, just think what a lovely idea for a frontispiece.'

Mr. Hayward laughed and humoured her. No harm in humouring—just for once—a pretty girl one'll most likely never see again as long as one lives.

'I *am* Mortimer's in Bond Street,' he said, with a quiet smile. 'In private life I'm known as Lambert Hayward; but in busi-

ness I'm Mortimer and Co., and I live by taking photographs. However, if you like, after breakfast, we'll try, though I don't know whether these Berbers will care very much to let us get a shot at their villages.'

'Oh, leave that to *me*,' Ionê said confidently. 'I'll soon make it all right. I'll get round the *amine*. He's a dear old gentleman, I can see, and he'll do anything one asks him—if only one goes the right way to work about it.'

And as she said it, she looked so bewitchingly arch and charming, that Mr. Hayward in his heart agreed with her altogether. Before such guileless art, even ripe men, he felt with a pang, are but as clay in the hands of the potter.

So after breakfast he got out his camera, obedient to her wish, with less concealment than was his wont, and proceeded to make preparations for photographing Ionê. The pretty cosmopolitan herself, meanwhile,

poured out voluble explanations in very womanly Arabic to the village chief, at each sentence of which the old Moslem stroked his own short beard caressingly, and called Allah to witness in strange gutturals that he meant no harm, and gazed hard at the pleading girl, and reflected to himself with a very puzzled head that the ways of Allah and these infidels are truly wonderful. Strange that such fair women should be wasted on unbelievers. But at the end of it all he raised his head and crossed his hands on his breast.

‘Allah is great,’ he murmured piously. ‘You have eyes like the gazelle. Do as you will, oh lady.’

‘We’ll have it here, then, Mr. Hayward,’ Ionê said, motioning him over towards the little domed tomb of a Mohammedan saint, surrounded by prickly pears and great spike-leaved aloes. ‘This makes such a pretty background. It’s Africa all over. And those children there must come across and be

examining my locket. 'This way, little ones,' in Arabic. 'Now, just so, then, Mr. Hayward.'

The operator hesitated.

'I hardly know if it's quite safe,' he said, glancing quickly to either side. 'This tomb is a *koubba*, you see—the shrine of some petty saint, almost as holy as a mosque, and exceedingly sacred. The people may be angry with us if I try to make a picture of it.'

Ionê beamed inquiry with those bright eyes at the *amine*. The *amine*, overpowered, nodded ungrudging assent. For those bright eyes, indeed, what live man would not forego all the houris in Paradise?

'Allah is great,' he muttered once more, 'and the tomb is a holy one. It will save the picture from sin. The bones of the blessed Sidi Ahmed Ben Moussa within it might sanctify anything.'

Which is one way of looking at it. Dese-

eration and wild revenge by sudden murder is the other one.

‘Shall I stand in line, too, just to balance the group?’ Owen suggested, half trembling.

Mr. Hayward, at the camera, raised one warning hand in solemn deprecation.

‘No, no,’ he said quickly. ‘That would never, never do. Your European get-up would break in upon the unity of the scene, Owen. Fetch Miss Dracopoli’s Algerian—I beg your pardon—Ionê’s, I mean. His dress is so distinctive. He’ll be much more appropriate.’

‘Won’t this man here do still better?’ Owen asked, raising his hand to point at a handsome young native who lounged by the arched door of a neighbouring hut, in the picturesque upland garb of the country, one long cloak folded toga-wise.

But Ionê dashed down his arm almost faster than he raised it.

‘Don’t do that!’ she cried, half alarmed.

'Haven't you learnt that yet? You've no idea what an insult it is. He might rush at you and stab you for it. In Morocco you should never venture to point at anybody. They think it brings down upon them the evil-eye. My old Moor at Oran told me that, and lots of other good tips like it. They're a ticklish people to deal with, these Berbers, and you've got to humour them. Pointing's almost as bad as asking the father of a household after his wives and family. You should ignore his womankind. They're his own concern here, you see, and nobody else's. What a country to live in! It wouldn't suit me. I'm awfully glad, after all, I was born in some ways an Englishwoman.'

The pose was quickly completed, and the picture taken. As soon as it was finished, Mr. Hayward went off for a minute to pack the negative with the rest, leaving Owen and Ionê alone by the dome-covered tomb for a short breathing-space.

The moment he was gone, Ionê gazed at the young man, and murmured in a ruminative voice :

‘So he’s Mortimer and Co. in business. How curious ! How singular !’

‘Yes, Mortimer and Co., in Bond Street,’ Owen answered, somewhat alarmed at the turn her thoughts were taking.

‘And out of it he calls himself Lambert Hayward, does he ?’

‘He does. Lambert Hayward.’

‘But what’s his *real* name ?’ Ionê burst out, turning round with a sudden dart, and flashing the question on him unexpectedly.

Owen was quite taken aback at her lightning-like quickness.

‘His *real* name,’ he repeated, all disconcerted. ‘Why, I told you—Lambert Hayward.’

‘Oh, bosh !’ Ionê answered promptly, with the saucy confidence of a pretty girl. ‘You

don't really expect me to swallow *that* now, do you ?

‘ Why not ? ’ Owen asked, flushing hot.

‘ Why not ? ’ Ionê echoed, brimming over with conscious discovery. ‘ Well, that’s really too absurd of you. Why not Lambert Hayward ? Simply because Lambert Hayward’s a pure English name, and your friend’s no more English than I am ; nor half as much either, if it comes to that. He wasn’t even born in England.’

‘ You think not ? ’ Owen answered uneasily, appalled at the girl’s hasty intuition.

‘ Oh dear no ! ’ Ionê cried with decision, shaking her pretty fluffy hair. ‘ I knew that at a glance. I knew it by his *r*’s, and his *o*, *w*’s, and his *s*, *h*’s. He’s not English at all, I’m sure ; the man’s a Russian.’

There was a deep, long pause. Owen could hear his own heart beat. He wouldn’t tell a lie, and the truth would undo him. He let his eyes rest nervously on the

ground some seconds; he didn't dare to raise them, lest this witch should read every thought in his reeling brain.

'He *calls* himself an Englishman,' he murmured at last, 'and says he was born in England;' and for one instant he looked at her.

Their eyes met in a flash. Ionê's peered deep into his; Owen quailed before her keen scrutiny. Then the girl added calmly:

'Yes, but it isn't *true*, you know, and you yourself know it isn't. He's as Russian as he can be—as Russian as they make them. His native tongue's Russki. I've half a mind to try him with a sentence or two in good Russ, just to see how it confuses him.'

Owen stared at her in mute agony. Oh, what on earth was he to do? He clasped his hands and grew cold; he felt like a criminal.

'For Heaven's sake *don't!*' he cried, all

aghast. 'If you do, what can he think, except that I've betrayed him?—and I'd sooner die than that! If you speak a word to him in Russian, I'll jump over the nearest crag and kill myself.'

He spoke with awful seriousness. Ionê took it in at a glance; she saw how alarmed he was, and nodded a quiet acquiescence.

'Don't be afraid,' she said shortly; 'I'm as dark as night, and as close as the grave. I won't whisper a word to him. Besides, to tell you the truth, I don't know any Russ. I said it for a joke. But you see I was right. You admit it yourself now. I was just sure he was a Russian.'

At that moment, as she spoke, Mr. Hayward stalked unconcernedly out of the guest-house in the rear.

'Daughter of all the Dracopolis,' he said gaily, for he was too polite to go on calling her Ionê outright, even at her own request, 'it's succeeded very well, and is a capital

photograph. To what address in London may I send you the positives ?

But even as he said it he saw what a mistake he had made. For it was giving Owen the clue to the pretty Greek's address—though, after all, if one came to think, he could have got it, if he was so minded, from Sacha, any day.

CHAPTER VIII.

DANGER AHEAD.

As soon as the photograph was finished, Ionê prepared to go her own way and continue her journey. Ali brought round her horse, ready saddled, and Ionê, now fully dressed in her embroidered jacket and fez, sprang lightly on its back with an easy vault, man-fashion.

‘Well, it’s been pleasant to meet a European face again, and hear a word or two of English,’ she said, turning towards them with a sunny smile on those full rich lips. ‘I don’t deny that, though I came here to escape them. It’s good of you to have troubled about my photograph, too.’

Thank you ever so much for it. And now good-bye. We may meet again some day, I've no doubt, in London.'

'All fortuitous atoms clash at the centre at last,' Mr. Hayward answered, in his sententious way, raising his hat and holding his head bare with the same stately courtesy as ever till she was well out of sight. 'What's your next stage to-day? Where do you go from here?'

Ionê looked to the strapping of the little bag behind her saddle as she answered gaily:

'Taourist, Taourist; a very fanatical and turbulent village, our host here tells me; no photographing mosques there. They shoot you for amusement. And you, Mr. Hayward? You'll be sleeping at——'

'Ouarzin,' Mr. Hayward answered, still bareheaded by the gateway.

'Good!' Ionê replied, with that expansive smile of hers—too expansive, Owen thought to himself, for it included all humanity.

And then she waved them a friendly adieu with her plump ungloved hand, and rode off like a sunbeam, rejoicing in her strength and youth and beauty.

As she rounded the corner out of sight, Mr. Hayward turned and gave the order to their own servant to start immediately. Half an hour later they were threading once more, single file, the narrow bridle-paths on the volcanic hillside.

The village of Ain-Essa, from which they had just come, like most other in the Berber uplands of the Atlas, crowned the summit of a small knoll; and all roads to all parts converged and diverged at a spot a few hundred yards on the slope below it. When they had reached this Clapham Junction of the local highway system, Mr. Hayward halted a moment in doubt, and pointed ahead inquiringly to one out of the three main routes that branched off in various directions.

‘Where does it go?’ he asked their servant in Arabic.

And the man, bending his head, made answer, ‘Taourist.’

Owen’s quick ear, accustomed to rapid assimilation of foreign languages, caught the strange sounds at once, and even interpreted the question aright, for he was beginning by this time to pick up a few stray words of Arabic. Taourist! That was where Ionê had said she was going! But they were not to follow her. Mr. Hayward looked away quickly, and turned to the second one.

‘And this?’ he asked, pointing to the west with his riding-whip.

‘Effendi, to Ouarzin.’

Mr. Hayward shook his head again. That surprised Owen not a little. For Ouarzin was the village they had mapped out to take next in due course on their route, and only that very morning, too, Mr. Hayward

had told Ionê he meant to go there. Now, Mr. Hayward, he knew, was by no means a man to turn lightly aside from any resolve once made, however unimportant.

‘The third one?’ he asked once more, with demonstrative crop.

The Arab attendant shrugged his shoulders uneasily.

‘Ah, Effendi,’ he said, ‘a bad road—a very bad road indeed—and a wild set of villagers. It was up there a Spaniard—a very rich man—was killed by the dervishes last year out of hatred of the infidel. I don’t advise you to try there. It’s called Beni-Mengella.’

In spite of this adjuration, however, Mr. Hayward loosened his rein, and took the last-named path without a word of explanation. Owen followed in silence. The Arab servant for his part was too respectful or too overawed to venture on questioning him.

They rode on for some minutes along the

steep and narrow mule-track, a mere ledge on the hillside, mounting up and ever up, beset with endless loose stones, and overhung by ragged thickets of prickly cactus. It was a beautiful scene. To the left rose the mountains, densely wooded to the top with rich and luxuriant Southern vegetation; to the right yawned the ravine, leading down into a deep valley, tilled in patches with scanty corn or waving gray with silvery olive groves. White villages perched here and there on buttressed spurs of the mountain-tops, petty mosques or domed tombs and whited sepulchres of dead saints, served to diversify the principal heights with appropriate local landmarks. Below lay tangled gorges of the mountain streams, pink with flowering oleanders or draped by rich festoons of creamy African clematis. Now and then, near the villages, they just spied for a second some group of laughing girls, their faces unveiled, bearing pitchers on their

heads, and passing to and fro with loud cries and merry chatter from the fountain. Mr. Hayward would have given much to get a snap-shot at such a group; but, unfortunately, the Berber women were as timid as fawns, and, seeing them, fled scared behind the shelter of the trees, or peeped out at them as they passed from behind some darkling doorway with the mingled curiosity and fear of a pack of shy children.

After half an hour or more of this silent ride, Owen broke in suddenly at last:

‘I thought, Mr. Hayward, you meant to go to Ouarzin.’

‘So I did,’ his friend answered, without looking back or slackening rein, ‘but at the very last moment I changed my mind. Modifiability of opinion, you know, Owen, as Herbert Spencer says, is a fair rough test of the highest intelligence.’

When Mr. Hayward talked like that Owen was always overawed. Irrepressible, cheery

English schoolboy that he was at heart, those short sentences of Mr. Hayward's shut him up completely.

As he answered nothing of himself, his friend added, after a pause :

'I wouldn't go to Taourist, because Miss Dracopoli said she was going there; and I wouldn't go to Ouarzin, because I'd told Miss Dracopoli we should spend the night there ourselves, and I thought—well, I thought perhaps she might elect to change her mind, and go on there, after all, on purpose to meet us. So now, you see, Owen, I'm always frank with you. I've told you the whole truth. You can guess the rest for yourself. Some men in my place would have concealed it from you sedulously. That's not my way, my boy. I tell you the simple truth, and I tell it outright. . . . To put it plainly, I don't think it's well for you to see too much of young women of Miss Dracopoli's temperament.'

And Mr. Hayward was quite right. He was acting, as usual, with all the wisdom of the serpent and all the innocence of the dove. By thus saying straight out his inmost mind to Owen, he was putting Owen on his honour, as it were, and compelling acquiescence. For Owen was Englishman enough to feel such generous treatment bound him down in turn to the intensest integrity. If Mr. Hayward didn't wish him to see more of Ionê, how in goodness' name could he ever do enough to avoid her in future ?

Not that he was so very anxious to meet their new friend again ; though she took his fancy immensely at first sight. Her freedom, her courage, her frankness, her innocence, all hit him hard on the tenderest points, and he knew it already. But it was the principle, above all things, that troubled him sorely. Did Mr. Hayward mean to put him thus on his honour, he wondered, as to Ionê in particular, or to all women in general ? If the

last, that was surely a very large order. Owen was just growing to the age when a pretty girl exercises a distinct magnetic influence on a young man's soul. Did Mr. Hayward intend that all that side of human nature should be a blank page to him? Was he to lead an anchorite's life? Did the cause demand even that painful sacrifice of him?

After a few minutes' pause he spoke.

'Miss Dracopoli in particular?' he asked, pursuing his own train of thought, as if Mr. Hayward had been following it all the time, as indeed was the case, 'or all women in general?'

Mr. Hayward turned and gazed at him—a mute, imploring gaze.

'My boy,' he said kindly, but with a sort of terror in his eye, 'sooner or later I felt this subject must be discussed between us, and to-day's as good an occasion for discussing it as any. On this point, Owen, I feel

exactly like Paul—I have no commandment from the Lord about it, but I give you my judgment: “I would have you without carefulness.” I would have your hands kept free, if possible, to do the work that’s set before you. Remember, love affairs are a very great snare; they take up a young man’s time and distract his attention. That’s why I’ve kept single to this day myself. There are women I might have loved, but I’ve cherished my celibacy. It allowed me to direct my undivided energies to the good of the cause. “He that is unmarried,” says Paul, “careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife.” There you have the question in a nutshell. And so, like the Apostle, I lay no command upon you. I’m too wise for that. If you *must* fall in love, you *must*, and no care or resolution will keep you out of it.

But, at any rate, you needn't rush into the way of it needlessly. Keep your head clear if you can, and let the cause have the heart of you.'

And for the rest of that ride Mr. Hayward talked on with unwonted freedom and vigour of the cause. He talked much, too, of his plans for Owen's future life, and of how the cause was to be benefited by his going into the diplomatic service.

'But even if I get an *attaché's* place,' Owen said at last, with a glance as he passed at a green ravine below them, 'how can you ever ensure my getting sent to Petersburg?' He always spoke of it so, and not as St. Petersburg. It's the Russian way, and he had picked up the habit from Mr. Hayward.

The elder man smiled a calm, serene smile of superior wisdom.

'My dear boy,' he said, looking back at him, 'you needn't trouble about that. Do you think I've laid my schemes in such a

haphazard way as your question implies?—I, Lambert Hayward? You don't know me yet, Owen. But *you* have no need to muddle your head about such trifles. Your place is to go wherever you may be sent, and to wait till the signal for action is given you. Till then you can leave all with perfect safety to me. When the signal comes you must strike, and strike home; and as long as this world lasts a grateful country will remember you.'

'I see,' Owen answered, almost blushing for his indiscretion in asking. 'I might have guessed it, I know. You do nothing carelessly, and I understand how many strings you hold in your hand at once; how intricate to pull, how difficult to co-ordinate. I realize how you're in touch with every chord and pulse of this vast organization the whole world over. Don't think, Mr. Hayward, I undervalue the privilege of being so trusted by you, and of living so near you. Don't think I doubt for a moment your power to

arrange this, or almost anything else you seriously set your mind upon. Only, I wondered, even with all your influence, how you could so far pull the wires of the Foreign Office in England as to get a particular *attaché* sent to Petersburg or to Vienna.'

The smile on Mr. Hayward's lips grew deeper and wiser than ever. He turned his head once more, and answered in the same masterful tone as before :

'Owen, you take far too much for granted. You think you fathom me, my boy; you think you fathom me. Many men and women have tried to do that in their time, but not one of them has succeeded. . . . Why, who told you I ever meant you to go to Petersburg at all? Pure inference of your own, pure human inference; / never said so.' He paused a moment and reflected. Then he went on again more confidentially. 'See here,' he said, dropping his voice by pure habit even in those unpeopled wilds. 'It's

not in Russia itself that we stand the best chance of striking a decisive blow at this hateful autocracy. Quite the contrary; nowhere else in the world are our opportunities so small, or the defence so active. There we're watched, numbered, thwarted, conspired against, counter-plotted; there we're held in check by endless spies and police and soldiers; there the men and women of the Romanoff horde are guided night and day by innumerable precautions. In Russia itself, I doubt whether even an English *attaché* could ever get near enough the person of the chief criminal or his leading accomplices to effect anything practical. He might, of course, or he mightn't. But that isn't the plan I have in view for you, Owen. I mean to let them send you wherever they like. And wherever you go, you'll be equally useful to us.'

'More perhaps elsewhere than at Petersburg itself,' Owen suggested, as calmly as if

it were the merest ordinary business. He had been brought up to regard it so, and it was so that he regarded it.

‘More perhaps elsewhere,’ Mr. Hayward assented with a nod. ‘Much more perhaps elsewhere. At Petersburg you might pick up for us some useful information, and being an Englishman and a member of the Embassy, you’d be the less suspected of having anything to do with us. But elsewhere you could manage far more than that. You might have access to the Romanoffs themselves, whenever one of them came by. There’s nowhere they mayn’t come—they pervade all Europe—Copenhagen, Athens, Nice, Florence, Brussels—and even the jealous care of the most friendly police can’t exclude from their circle members of the diplomatic body. Why, they’re not even safe in Asia itself; we dogged them through India. One of them was wounded the other

day in Japan; another was attacked, though all that was hushed up, at the Taj at Agra. Therein lies our strength, my boy; we're ubiquitous and irrepressible. The criminals never know from what unexpected point, at what unexpected moment, the ministers of justice may overtake them and pounce down upon them. And what would terrify them more than the sudden discovery some day, in the midst of the festivities of some foreign court, that a minister of justice stood unnoticed even there, in the guise of an envoy of some friendly potentate? We want to make it impossible for any man, however brave, to accept the bad eminence of autocrat and gaoler-in-chief of All the Russias. Can you imagine any plan more likely to accomplish our end than this plan of striking a blow where it's least expected by the hand of one who had always passed for a neutral Englishman, and whose very connection with the Cause or the People in Russia no one but

ourselves would ever so much as dream of suspecting ?'

Owen glanced ahead at him admiringly.

'Mr. Hayward,' he said with profound conviction, 'you're a wonderful man. If anyone can free Russia, you surely will do it! It makes me proud to have sat at such a patriot's feet. Forgive me if I've asked you too much to-day. I'm only the very least of your subordinates, I know, and I never want to worm out more than the commander-in-chief himself willingly tells me.'

Mr. Hayward gave him a look of true paternal kindness.

'Right, my boy,' he said warmly. 'You're always right. I never had anyone I could trust and be trusted by like you, from the very beginning. That gives me much hope. Though things look black ahead now.'

And then, in a voice full of fiery indignation, he gave way all at once in a very rare outburst, and began to recount in rapid

words a whole string of terrible atrocities in Siberia and elsewhere, detailed to him in cipher by his last budget from St. Petersburg.

Owen listened, and felt his blood boil within him. Not for nothing had Mr. Hayward trained up in the faith his Nihilist neophyte.

CHAPTER IX.

FAMILY BUSINESS.

IN Morocco, these things. Away over in St. Petersburg, that self-same day, a lady was closeted close in a bureau of the Third Section with that stern military policeman General Alexis Selistoff.

‘And so you’ve obtained some influence with him, you think, Madame Mireff?’ the General said, musing and twirling his bronzed thumbs.

‘Influence?’ Madame Mireff repeated, with a bland feminine smile. ‘I can just twist him round my fingers—so,’ and she suited the action to the word. ‘As a statesman, of course, Lord Caistor’s unapproachable and

irreproachable—we all know that; but as a man—well, he's human. I take him on the human side—and I do what I like with him.'

The General smiled responsive—a grim smile and sardonic.

'Politics,' he murmured in a very soft voice, like a woman's for gentleness—though, to be sure, it was he who flogged a Polish lady to death once at Warsaw for some trifling act of insubordination to the Government orders—'politics have a morality all of their own.'

Madame Mireff assented with a graceful nod.

'Though you mustn't for a moment suppose,' she said, hesitating, 'that our *personal* relations——'

The General was a gentleman. (In Russia that quality is by no means incompatible with flogging women to death when the morality peculiar to politics sanctions or even demands

such an extreme act of discipline.) He cut her short at once with a polite wave of the hand.

‘My dear Madame Mireff,’ he said, in his most deprecating tone, ‘I hope you don’t think I could for one second imagine that a lady of your character——’

One outstretched palm and a half-averted face completed the sentence.

‘Of course you understand me,’ Madame Mireff went on, blushing a trifle even so. ‘We are friends, he and I—that’s all. The Earl is an able man and a keen politician; but in private life he’s a most charming person. We get on together admirably. *Figurez vous* that I go down to stop now and then with dear Lady Caistor at Sherringham-on-Sea; and there I have the Earl to myself half the day in the garden or the drawing-room. . . . We never talk politics, General, you must understand. *Pas si bête*, I need hardly tell you. I influence him gently;

the dropping of water on a stone ; a constant imperceptible side-pressure, if I may say so. Russia in the abstract ; a Russian woman in the concrete ; that's all I have to play against his astuteness and his suspicion. Our sincerity, our devotion, our simple, natural straightforwardness, our enthusiasm for humanity—those are the chief chords of my four-stringed lute. I harp on it always, though not, I hope, monotonously. It tells upon him in the end. You can see it telling upon him. He says to himself : “The character of the units determines the character of the aggregate. A nation made up of units like this must be on the whole a tolerably decent one.” And it influences his policy. You must notice for yourself he's less distrustful of us than formerly.'

The General leaned back in his round office chair, neatly padded in brown leather, stamped with the imperial arms, and surveyed her critically.

No wonder a statesman who accepted Madame Mireff as the typical Russian should think well of the country whose tangible embodiment and representative she proclaimed herself. For a handsomer ripe woman of forty-five you wouldn't wish to see anywhere than Olga Mireff. Her figure was full and round, yet not too full or too round for the most fastidious taste; her charms were mature, yet all the richer for their maturity. An intelligent, earnest, enthusiastic face, great child-like eyes, a sweet and generous smile, rare beauty of feature, rare naïveté of expression—all these went to the making up of a most engaging personality. Her hands were plump, but soft and white and dimpled. Her motions were slow, but they quickened with animation, and grew positively mercurial under the influence of enthusiasm.

The very woman, General Selistoff thought to himself, to twist round her fingers, as she

said, a clever and impressionable Foreign Secretary like Lord Caistor. Alexis Selistoff had never had a better made instrument to work with. This little wedge of feminine insinuation might enable him in time to permeate the whole inert mass of English opinion.

The General paused, and fingered his waxed moustache.

‘And you go back again to-morrow?’ he said, still surveying her with approbation.

Madame Mireff nodded assent.

‘Unless you wish it otherwise,’ she answered; ‘I am yours to command. But if you see no objection—then to London to-morrow.’

The man of politics shrugged his shoulders. They were broad and well set.

‘Oh, as for my wishes, *chère dame*,’ he said, with an air of official disclaimer, ‘you know very well *they* have nothing at all to

do with the matter. You are not, and never were, an agent of the Government. If you drop in here for a chat with me, in a moment of leisure, you drop in as a friend—nothing more, *bien entendu*. Some little relaxation, some little interlude of the charms of female society, may surely be allowed us in a life so monotonous and so deadly dull as this eternal routine of ours. I sign my own name on an average three hundred and seventy-four times per diem. But as to business—business—you have nothing to do with *that*. *La haute politique* is not a lady's affair. Tape, dockets, files, pigeon-holes, those are administration, if you will; but a visit to England by an unauthorized Russian lady—he gazed at her hard—‘mere private gadding. Disabuse your mind as to that, Madame, disabuse your mind as to that, though I know you don't even need to be told to disabuse yourself.’

Madame Mireff's smile as he spoke those

words was a study in complexity. It contained in itself four or five smiles superposed, in distinct strata, and one of them, perhaps, would have surprised General Selistoff not a little, had he known its full import. But Madame didn't enlighten him on that abstruse point. She only answered submissively :

‘I'm well aware of those facts, General. My one object in life is to serve my country and my Czar, unobtrusively and unofficially, by such simple private influence as a mere woman can exert in a foreign capital.’

Though Madame knew very well in her own heart that a Russian lady would never be permitted to exercise influence on English politics, directly or indirectly, in whatever capacity, unless it suited the Government she should unofficially represent it. And so, too, did General Selistoff. Had it been otherwise, no passport at the very least—perhaps even imprisonment, the mines, Siberia.

They looked at one another and smiled

again, with their tongues in their cheeks, mentally speaking, like the Roman augurs when they met in private. Then the General spoke again :

‘ And Prince Ruric Brassoff?’ he said, with an ugly frown on his high bronzed forehead ; ‘ still no trace of him anywhere ? You haven’t one hope of a clue ? How that man eludes us !’

‘ No,’ Madame Mireff answered demurely, laying one plump hand with resignation over the other, and shaking a solemn head. ‘ He eludes us still. How can you hope to catch him ? I feel convinced even his own associates don’t know where he is. I’ve made every inquiry. The man works like a mole underground, popping up here and there for a moment to take breath, as it were, or not even that. He’s invisible and incalculable. Nobody ever sees him, nobody ever talks with him ; only written messages flutter down now and again from the sky, or from

unknown sources, bearing an Egyptian post-mark, it may be, or a Maltese, or a Norwegian, or a Sicilian. They're not even in his own hand, they say—not the bulk of the document. Only the signature's his; the rest's type-written, or copied by an amanuensis, or dictated, or in cipher. His subordinates have nothing to go upon but those two mysterious words, "Ruric Brassoff," at the bottom of an order. But they obey it as implicitly as if it fell upon them from heaven. Most of them have never set eyes upon the man himself in their lives at all; nobody on earth has set eyes upon him for ten years past; yet there he is still, wrapped in the clouds as it were, but pulling all the strings just as clearly as ever. It's a most mysterious case. Though, after all, as a diplomat, one can hardly help admiring him.'

General Selistoff looked up sharply at her in a surprised sort of way. Born bureaucrat that he was, he couldn't understand how

anyone could admire even the cleverest and most audacious of rebels.

‘Well, that’s a matter of opinion,’ he said slowly, pressing his thumb very tight on the edge of his desk. ‘For my part, if I’d Ruric Brassoff’s neck under here this minute——’ The thumb was raised for one second and then squeezed down again significantly. General Selistoff paused once more. His eyes looked away into the abysses of space. ‘Ruric Brassoff,’ he repeated slowly, ‘Ruric Brassoff, Ruric Brassoff. If only we could catch that one single man, we wouldn’t take long to crush out the whole infernal conspiracy.’

‘You think so?’ Madame inquired, looking up.

‘He’s its head,’ the bureaucrat answered impatiently. ‘No organization on earth can possibly go on when it’s head’s cut off.’

And he had had experience, too, in the results of decapitation.

‘We got on somehow after our late beloved Czar was murdered by these wretches,’ Madame put in, very gravely.

The General sat up stiff. He didn’t like this turn. ’Twas beneath him to bandy words and arguments with a woman.

‘Well, you’ll not relax your efforts, at any rate,’ he said, more coldly, ‘to get some clue to Prince Ruric Brassoff’s whereabouts. Remember, five hundred thousand roubles and the title of Princess. Ceaseless vigilance is our only resource. Leave no stone unturned. Under one or other of them, we know, must lurk the scorpion that bit us.’

‘True,’ Madame answered, relapsing into pure submissiveness, for she saw it was wisest.

‘And there’s one other point I want to suggest to you,’ the General went on, somewhat mollified. ‘A very painful point; but I must bring myself to speak of it. I’ve often thought of mentioning it to you, dear

Madame, before, and when it came to the point I've always been naturally reluctant.' He dropped his voice suddenly. 'You'll understand why,' he went on, 'when I tell you it relates to my unhappy and misguided brother, Sergius Selistoff.'

Madame Mireff bowed her head with a sympathetic inclination. She let a rhetorical pause of some seconds elapse before she answered the General, whose own eyes fell abashed, as is natural when one mentions some disgraceful episode in one's family history. Then she murmured in a lower key :

'I understand perfectly. I never expected to hear that name mentioned in this room again, and unless you had brought it up yourself, you can readily believe, Excellency, I wouldn't have dared to allude to it.'

'No, no,' the General continued, forcing himself to speak with difficulty. 'But I'm anxious to find out something about his

family and affairs, and you're the only person on earth, dear Madame, to whose hands I could endure to confide the inquiry. To no one else but yourself could I bring myself to speak about it. Sergius had a boy, you know—in fact, two children, a boy and a girl. Before he was sent to Siberia, after his treachery became known,' and the old bureaucrat spoke like one weighed down with shame, 'those children were spirited away somehow out of the country. You know their history, I suppose? You know the circumstances of that unfortunate marriage?'

'Not in full,' Madame answered, all respectful sympathy. 'And when one's engaged on a matter of the kind it's best, of course, to know all. I've only heard that Sergius Selistoff married an Englishwoman.'

The General bowed his head once more.

'Yes, an Englishwoman,' he answered.

‘But that’s not all. A public singer at Vienna, who, as we have reason to believe, for her family’s sake sang under an assumed name, and whose relations in England we’ve never been able to trace since Sergius . . . went to the fate reserved for traitors. On the morning when the administrative order was issued from this office for my brother’s arrest—I signed it myself—Madame Selistoff and the children disappeared from Petersburg as if by magic. My sister-in-law, as you must have heard, was discovered, raving mad, a few weeks later, in the streets of Wilna, though how or why she got there nobody ever knew, and from that day till her death, some seven months afterwards, she did nothing but cry that her children at least must be saved; her children at least must get away safe from that awful place to England.’

The old man stroked his moustache.

‘It was terrible,’ he said slowly—‘terrible

what suffering Sergius brought upon us all, and on that unhappy woman !

‘It was terrible indeed,’ Madame Mireff answered with a look of genuine horror.

‘Well, what I want just now,’ the General continued, rising up in all the height of his great Russian figure, and going to a little cupboard, from which he brought forth a small bundle of brown and dusty papers—‘what I want just now is that you should find out for me in England whether those children are there still, and in whose keeping.’

‘Perfectly,’ Madame answered. ‘You wish, perhaps, to be of service to the boy—to bring your brother’s son back to Russia again, give him the rank of a Selistoff, and make him a loyal subject of our beloved Emperor.’

The old man brought his fist down on his desk with a resounding blow.

‘No, no !’ he cried fiercely, his face lighting

up with indignation. 'Ten thousand times no! I renounce Sergius Selistoff and all his works for ever. . . . The boy's no nephew of mine—no true-born Selistoff—an English half-breed by a rebel father. I'd send him to the mines, as I sent my brother before him, if only I could catch him. As Sergius died, so his son should die in turn. . . . A Selistoff, did you say? Our blood disowns the whole brood of the traitor.'

'I see,' Madame answered, with true Russian impassiveness. Not a muscle of her face moved. Not a quiver passed over her. Only the long, black lashes drooped above the great childlike eyes. 'And you want me to find out where they're living now? Well, if anybody in England can track them, I can promise it will be I. Names, ages, and descriptions—I see you have them there all pat in your *dossier*.'

The General undid the bundle with an unwonted trembling in those iron fingers. Then

he stretched out the papers before Madame Mireff's keen eyes.

'Alexandra, aged four at the time of her flight, would now be twenty-five, or thereabouts,' he said, quivering. 'Sergius, a baby in arms, would be between twenty and twenty-one. Here, you see, are their descriptions and such details as we could recover of the mother's family. But it was a *mésalliance*, you must understand, for a Russian nobleman—a complete *mésalliance*. She gave her name at the ceremony as Aurora Montmorency, but we believe it to have been false, and we don't know the real one. *Your* business will be only to hunt up these people; *mine*, to crush them, when found, as one would crush beneath one's heel a brood of young vipers.'

'Perfectly,' Madame answered, with a charming smile. 'I understand my mission, Excellency. I will obey your instructions.'

CHAPTER X.

AN UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTER.

AND while in St. Petersburg, General Selis-toff was uttering those words to his trusted associate, on the mountain path near Beni-Mengella, in Morocco, Mr. Hayward was exclaiming enthusiastically to Owen Cazalet: 'It's a glorious work, my boy, and it's laid upon you in due course by your glorious inheritance.'

'And yet,' Owen murmured, musing, 'it's a terrible one, too, when one comes to think of it.'

Mr. Hayward eyed him hard with a quick, half-startled air.

'Yes, terrible, certainly,' he answered, with

the rapt air of a prophet, 'but inevitable, for all that—a stern duty imposed upon you by your birth and training. Consider, Owen, not only that unhappy country, a brute bulk, bearing, half loath, upon her myriad shoulders the burden of one miserable horror-haunted man—the most wretched of mankind—but your own part in it as well, your own calling and election to avenge and assist her. Remember your father, sent to sicken and die by inches in a Siberian mine; remember your mother, driven mad in the streets of Wilna in her frantic endeavours to carry you and her daughter in safety beyond the Russian frontier. All these things the Romanoffs have done to you and yours in your very own household. What justice can there be for them except in the angry vengeance of their outraged serfs? On you falls that honour. You are summoned to this great work. You should accept it with pride, with gratitude, with aspiration.'

‘So I do,’ Owen answered, a feeling of shame breaking over him like a wave at even so transient an expression of doubt and hesitancy. ‘Trust me, Mr. Hayward, I will be ready when the time comes. Don’t fear for my fidelity. I won’t fail you in the struggle.’

And, indeed, that manly young Englishman, for such in all essentials he was, really meant it and felt it. Not for nothing had Mr. Hayward taken charge of his youth, and slowly, by tentative degrees, as he found his pupil’s mind ripe for change, instilled into him all the principles of the fiercest Russian Nihilism. Everything had worked with that cheery, vigorous, enthusiastic English lad in the direction of accepting the faith thus forced upon him. His reverence for Mr. Hayward, at once the gentlest and most powerful mind he had ever known; his horror at the fate of his own father and mother; his native love of freedom, of indi-

viduality, of adventure ; his sterling English honesty of purpose ; his inherited Russian fatalistic tendency—all led him alike to embrace with fervour the strange career Mr. Hayward sketched out for his future. Nihilism had become to him a veritable religion. He had grown up to it from his cradle ; he had heard of it only from the lips of its adherents ; he had been taught to regard it as the one remaining resource of an innocent people ground down to the very earth by an intolerable tyranny. So it came to pass that Owen Cazalet, who, from one point of view, as his friends and companions saw him at Moor Hill, was nothing more than a strong and pleasing athletic young Englishman, was, from another point of view, by Mr. Hayward's side, a convinced and unflinching Russian Nihilist.

All day they rode on across the volcanic hills ; towards evening they reached the dubious village of Beni-Mengella, whose in-

habitants even their tolerant Moorish servant had described to them as very devout and fanatical Mohammedans. At the outskirts of the hamlet three Berbers, clad each in a single loose white robe, not much differing from a nightshirt, met them full in the path.

‘Peace be with you,’ Mr. Hayward cried out, accosting them in the usual Moslem formula.

‘Peace be with all true believers,’ the men answered in a surly tone.

The alteration was significant. It meant that even the protection of the Serene Sheerifian Umbrella didn’t entitle such open rebels against the will of Allah to peace in that village.

‘This is ominous,’ Mr. Hayward muttered quietly to Owen. ‘We may have trouble here. These men refuse to give us peace as we pass. That always means in Islam more or less chance of danger.’

‘So much the better,’ Owen thought to himself, reddening visibly with excitement.

They rode on in silence up to the *amine’s* house. A handsome young Moor, in an embroidered jacket, lounged in a graceful attitude against the richly-carved doorpost. He started as they approached, and then burst into a merry laugh. But—the laugh was Ioné’s!

‘Well, this *is* odd,’ the stranger cried aloud in English, in a very feminine voice. ‘You said you were going to Ouarzin. You changed your minds suddenly. What on earth brought you on here?’

‘Well—yes; we changed our minds,’ Mr. Hayward answered, with a slight stammer, looking decidedly sheepish; ‘we altered our route when we reached the fork in the roads. We heard . . . this village was more likely to afford us something really good in the way of adventure. But you? we’ve fair reason to question you as well. Didn’t you

tell us this morning you meant to sleep at Taourist ?

Ionê laughed once more that merry musical laugh of hers, and tossed her fluffy hair off her ears at the same time with an easy movement of her head.

‘What fun!’ she cried, delighted at the absurd *contretemps*, in spite of herself. ‘Why, I came here, if you must know, on purpose to avoid you. Not out of rudeness, you understand; if it were in England, now, I’d have been most pleased to accept your kind companionship. But, you see, I’ve come out here all this way to do this journey alone; the whole point of it naturally consists in my riding through Morocco by myself in native clothes, and perhaps getting killed on the way—which would be awfully romantic. So, of course, if I’d allowed you to come on with me, or to follow me up, it’d have spoilt the game; there’d have been no riding alone; it’d have been a personally

conducted tour, just the same as the Cookies. Well, that made me turn off at a tangent to Beni-Mengella, for I thought perhaps you two men might be afraid to let me go on by myself, or might go ahead to Taourist on purpose to make sure I got into no trouble. And that, you must see for yourselves, would have put an end at once to my independence. The value of this experiment consists entirely in my going through Morocco alone on my own hired horse, and coming out alive and unhurt at the other end of it.'

Mr. Hayward gazed at her with a somewhat comical ruefulness.

'It is unfortunate,' he said slowly. 'But we must put up with it now. I'm sorry we've incommoded you. It's too late to go anywhere else at this hour, I'm afraid, even if there were anywhere else in the neighbourhood to go to.'

'Oh, well, now you're here,' Ionê answered

with good-humoured condescension, ‘you may as well stay, for, after all, we had a very jolly evening together yesterday at Ain-Essa, hadn’t we? Besides, you know, it’s lucky for you in some ways I’m here; for I can tell you these are just about the liveliest and most aggressive Mohammedans I’ve met anywhere yet; they’re war to the knife on infidels, and if you’d come among them alone—without a lady to protect you, I mean—I believe they’d have murdered you as soon as look at you. One or two of them seemed half inclined at first to doubt about the propriety of murdering even *me*; but they’ve got over that now; I’ve made things all square with them. I’ve repeated enough verses from the Koran to satisfy the *amine* himself as to my perfect orthodoxy; and I’ve Mash-Allah’d till I’m hoarse at every man, woman, and child in the village. Besides, I’ve made up to the mollah of the mosque. If I say to him, “These are friends of mine,”

not a soul in the place will dare to touch you.'

As for Owen, in spite of Mr. Hayward's warnings, he didn't pretend to conceal from himself the obvious fact that he was very glad indeed to come again upon Ionê. Not wholly from the point of view of personal liking, either—he had a better reason than that, a more serious reason. It was a point of honour. Their last few words together at Ain-Essa, where they had spent the previous night, had left an abiding sense of terror on his inmost soul. Nobody but Ionê Dracopoli had ever suggested in his hearing the fatal idea that Mr. Hayward was a Russian. And he hadn't had time to impress upon her in full (before he left) the profound necessity of keeping that idea a secret. All day long his conscience had been pricking him for that unwilling disclosure. Had he assented too openly? Had he betrayed Mr. Hayward's trust by too easy an

acquiescence? He'd been longing every hour of that tedious march for the chance of seeing Ionê alone once more, to beg her to keep silence; and now that chance had come he was profoundly grateful for it. To him the suspense had in many ways been a terrible one.

He had never had a secret from Mr. Hayward in his life before. That feeling of itself gave him a sense of guilt. But he couldn't pluck up courage to make a clean breast of it, either. Mr. Hayward would think he might have parried the thrust better. To say the truth, he was ashamed to let his guardian see the painful fact that a girl had got the best of him in a very brief encounter.

Mr. Hayward strolled into the guest-house to arrange about accommodation. While he was gone Owen was left alone at the door for one minute with Ionê. There was no time to be lost. He must seize the oppor-

tunity. Such a chance to speak might not occur again. Mustering up all his courage suddenly (for he was a bashful young man), he turned to her at once, and said, in a very earnest tone :

‘ Miss Dracopoli, I thank heaven I’ve met you again. I wanted—I needed—I required one word more with you. I daren’t tell you why. To do that would be a crime. But I want you to promise me as faithfully as you can you’ll never mention to anybody your suspicion that Mr. Hayward’s a Russian. It might be death to him if it were known, and death to me, too. I’ve no time to explain more. He mustn’t come out and see me talking to you so. But, for heaven’s sake, I beg of you, promise me—do promise me you’ll never mention the matter as long as you live to anyone.’

He spoke with concentrated earnestness, like one who really means most profoundly what he says. Ionê glanced at him for a

minute, half in doubt, half in amusement, with those big, laughing eyes of hers. She didn't quite know whether to take it as a very good joke or not. Most things in life were very good jokes to Ionê. Then she sobered down suddenly.

'Why--this--is--Nihilism,' she said, word by word, in a very surprised voice. 'No wonder you're alarmed. Yes, this is--just--Nihilism. But you needn't be afraid, Owen Cazalet. I give you my promise. I'll never say a word of it as long as I live to anyone.'

She spoke now as seriously as he had spoken himself. She said it, and she meant it. In a moment the laughing girl saw the full magnitude of the issue at stake, and for once was sobered. Owen glanced at her timidly, and their eyes met again.

'Thank you,' he said, very low in a very timid voice. 'Ten thousand times, thank you.'

‘But what’s his Russian name?’ Ionê asked after a brief pause, half coaxingly, and with true feminine curiosity. ‘You *might* tell me that, now. You’ve as good as admitted it.’

‘Ah, but I don’t *know* it!’ Owen answered very earnestly, without one second’s hesitation. ‘I haven’t heard it myself. He’s never once told me.’

His voice had a ring of truth in it. Ionê felt sure from its tone he meant just what he said. She gazed at him curiously once more.

‘Never a word of it to anyone,’ she repeated, with solemn assurance, wringing his hand in her own. ‘I’ll cut my tongue out first, for I see you mean it.’

At that moment, as she spoke, Mr. Hayward’s face loomed up at the far end of the passage from the courtyard inside. Ionê saw it and was wise. She let Owen’s hand drop suddenly.

‘And such a funny old Moor with a green turban on his head,’ she went on quite loud, in her gayest and most natural voice, as if continuing a conversation on some perfectly *banal* point, ‘you never saw in your life. He was fat and dark, and had a mole on his forehead, and he called Allah to witness at every second word he was letting me have that horse dirt cheap for my beautiful eyes, at rather less than half its value.’

‘They’re dreadful old cheats,’ Owen echoed in the same voice; but he felt, all the same, most horribly ashamed of himself.

These petty social deceits sit much heavier on us men than on the lips of women, where they spring spontaneous. And it cut him to the heart to think he was employing such mean feminine wiles—against Mr. Hayward.

After that night, he thought to himself bitterly, he’d take very good care never to meet Ionê Dracopoli anywhere again. Though, to be sure, she was the nicest girl

he'd ever met in his life, and the freest in the true sense of all he admired in freedom. But still—the cause! the cause!—for the sake of the cause he'd avoid her like poison. She was a dangerous woman.

More dangerous even than he knew; for of all possible links to bind a man and a woman together for life, almost in spite of themselves, commend me to a secret shared in common.

CHAPTER XI.

MAN PROPOSES.

THAT night at Beni-Mengella was Owen's last meeting with Ionê Dracopoli in Morocco, and he enjoyed it immensely. All through the evening, indeed, Ionê was as gay, as communicative, as frankly confidential, as she had been at Ain-Essa; Owen even fancied she was possibly pleased to meet him again; but if so, it was a pleasure she didn't desire to let pall by too frequent repetition, for next morning, after their native breakfast of fried cakes and cous-cous, Ionê turned one merry forefinger up-lifted to Mr. Hayward.

'Now, mind,' she said imperiously, 'this

time, no reconsiderations. First thoughts are best. Tell me your tour, and I'll tell you mine. Let's hold by them rigidly. You stick to yours, and I'll stick to my own; then we won't go running up against one another, head foremost, like the people in a farce—exit Mr. Hayward and Owen Cazalet left, enter Ionê Dracopoli, R.U.E., and all that sort of thing. I want to be able to say I rode through Morocco alone "from kiver to kiver." I've almost done it now. Five or six evenings will bring me down to Mogador. Look here: this is my route as far as one can trace it, where there are no proper maps.' And she unfolded Joseph Thomson's rough chart of the Atlas range before him, and indicated, as far as possible, with one plump, white finger, the general idea of her future stopping-places.

Mr. Hayward acquiesced, and took the opposite direction. For his own part, if

Ionê were anxious to avoid him, he was ten times more anxious to avoid Ionê.

Of the two tours, therefore, the independent young lady's was finished first. Mr. Hayward and Owen were still riding slowly up steep mule-paths of the mountains in the interior long after Ionê had changed her Turkish trousers and her embroidered Moorish jacket for the tailor-made robe of Regent Street and Piccadilly. As to Owen's later feats in the Atlas, I shall say no more of them here. The untrodden peaks that he climbed, the steep cliffs that he scaled, the strange insects he discovered, the rare plants he brought home—how he withstood the natives at the shrine of Sidi Salah of the High Peak—how he insisted on photographing the Mosque of Abd-er-Rahman, with the Two Tombs in the chief seat of Moslem fanaticism in the far interior—are they not all written with appropriate photogravures in Hayward's 'Mountaineering in Southern

Morocco'? Who lists may read them there. For the purposes of this present history they have no further importance; enough to say that at the end of two weeks Owen Cazalet returned by the Cunard steamer to London, a travelled man, and an authority on the vexed points of Atlantic topography.

Immediately on his return, Sacha met him at Euston with important news. A domestic revolution had occurred at Moor Hill during his short absence. Sacha met him at once with unusual excitement for that placid nature.

'You mustn't go down to auntie's to-night,' she said, as soon as he stepped on to the platform; 'you must come to my lodgings and sleep. I want to have a good long talk with you as soon as possible, Owen; I've such lots of things to tell you.'

'Your lodgings!' Owen cried, astonished. 'You're in rooms up in town, then? Why, how's that, Sacha?'

‘Oh, it’s a long story to tell,’ Sacha answered, somewhat flushed herself out of her wonted composure. ‘You see, you’re six weeks in arrears. We haven’t been able to write to you. And ever so many queer things have happened in England meanwhile. In the first place—that’s the beginning of it all—I’ve sold my Academy picture.’

‘You don’t mean to say so!’ Owen exclaimed, overjoyed. ‘But not at your own price, surely, Sacha. You know you told us it was quite prohibitive yourself. You put it so high just for the dignity of art, you said.’

Sacha’s not unbecoming blush mantled deeper with conscious success.

‘Well, not exactly that,’ she answered. ‘I knew the price was prohibitive—or, at least, I believed so; but I reckoned its value in accordance with what anybody was likely to give for it. It was *worth* a hundred and fifty, so I asked a hundred and fifty for it. And a great Manchester buyer snapped it up

like a shot, paying the price down without a word ; and he told me afterwards he'd got it on the advice of a famous critic—he wouldn't say who, but I think I know—and that if I'd asked for two hundred I should have had it.'

'You don't mean to say so!' Owen cried, pleased and proud. 'Well, that's splendid news! Though you deserve it, Sacha, you know ; I'm sure you deserve it. I've always said myself you'd be a very great artist one of these days—a very, very great artist—like Madame Lebrun or Rosa Bonheur.'

Sacha smiled demurely. It was no small joy to her to get such praise from Owen, for she believed in her brother.

'Well, then, dear,' she went on, 'you see, that made me a rich woman outright all at once, for he gave me a cheque for the whole of the money in a lump—a hundred and fifty pounds at a single go, and all earned by myself, too. Isn't it just delightful? Is this

your bag? Then put it in a hansom and come with me to my rooms. I'm in lodgings close by, while we look after the papering and furnishing in Victoria Street.'

'The *what?*' Owen cried, throwing his portmanteau in front as if it weighed a pound or two, and taking his seat by her side, bewildered and astonished.

'Oh, I forgot; that's part of the history,' Sacha answered, running on. 'Why, the fact of it is, Owen, being a rich woman now, I've left Moor Hill for good, and Aunt Julia too, and determined to come and live in town on my own scale in future.'

'And give up the studio!' Owen cried regretfully.

'Oh, I shall have a studio in our flat, of course,' Sacha replied, with a slight sigh. 'Though, naturally, it *was* a wrench—I don't deny it—to give up the dear old five-cornered nook at the Red Cottage. But I felt it was necessary. For a long time I have realized

the fact that it was artistic stagnation to live down where we did—in the depths of Surrey. In art, you know, Owen, one wants constant encouragement, stimulation, criticism. One ought to be dropping perpetually into other men's rooms'—Sacha said it as naturally as if she were a man herself—'to see how they're getting on, how they're developing their ideas, and whether they're improving them or spoiling them in the course of the painting. One ought to have other men dropping perpetually into one's own rooms to look on in return, and praising one or slanging one as the case demands; or, at any rate, observing, discussing, suggesting, modifying. I felt I was making no progress at all in my art at Moor Hill. I stuck just where I'd got to when I left Paris. So, when this great stroke of luck came, I said to myself at once, "Now I'm a painter launched. I shall be rich in future. I must do justice to my art, and live in the very thick of the artistic

world. I must move in the swim. I must go up to London." And that's how we decided on this flat in Victoria Street, which we're now engaged in furnishing and decorating.'

'But what does Aunt Julia say?' Owen exclaimed, a little taken aback by so much unexpected precipitancy.

Sacha suppressed a slight smile.

'Dear old Aunt Julia!' she said, with a faint undercurrent of amusement in her earnest voice. 'Well, you know just what she'd say, Owen! Aunt Julia can never understand us modern girls. She thinks the world's turned topsy-turvy in a lump, and that everything womanly's gone and vanished clean out of it. She puts it all down, though, to dear mother's blood. Aurora, she says, was always flighty. And no doubt she's right, too, in her way. It's from mother, I expect, Owen, that I inherit the artistic tendency and many other things in

my nature. In her it came out in the form of music ; in me it comes out in the form of painting. But it's the same impulse at bottom, you know, whichever turn it takes. There's nothing of the sort about Aunt Julia, certainly.'

'They must have been singularly different in type, no doubt,' Owen mused, with a sigh. 'Of course I can't remember poor mother myself, Sacha ; but from all you've told me, all I've heard from Mr. Hayward, she must have been the opposite pole from poor dear Aunt Julia.'

'Well, they were only half-sisters, you see,' Sacha answered in an apologetic tone. 'And I fancy *our* grandmother must have been a very different person indeed from the first Mrs. Cazalet. Certainly, you can't imagine Aunt Julia going off on her own account as a public singer to Berlin and Vienna, or marrying a Russian like poor father, or trying to escape with us under a feigned name, or, in

fact, doing anything else that wasn't perfectly British and ordinary and commonplace and uninteresting.'

'Aunt Julia was born to be a decorous English old maid,' Owen interposed, laughing. 'She'd have missed her vocation in life if anybody'd happened to propose to her and married her.'

'Yes, and when she heard we were going to take a flat in town together—three girls alone—and have latchkeys of our own and nobody to chaperon us—why, I thought, poor dear thing! she'd have fainted on the spot. But what horrified her most was our grandest idea of all—that we're to be independent and self-supporting—self-sufficient, in fact, or at least self-sufficing. We mean to do our own work and to keep no servants.'

'That's good!' Owen exclaimed, seized at once with the idea, in the true vein of the family. 'That's splendid, I declare! So

advanced ! so Socialistic ! Only I say, Sacha, you'll want someone to do the heavy work of the house. I expect I'll have to come up to town as well and live with you as hall-porter.'

'I don't think so,' Sacha answered, gazing admiringly as always at that fresh strong frame of his. 'I'm pretty able-bodied myself, you know ; the Selistoffs were always a race of giants, Mr. Hayward says ; and though Blackbird's a tiny feeble wee thing—you've heard me speak of Blackbird—Hope Braithwaite, you know, that poor little girl with a soul and no body who composes such sweet songs—though Blackbird's not up to much, Ionê Dracopoli's quite strong enough, I'm sure, to do the work of a household.'

'Ionê Dracopoli !' Owen cried, in an almost ironical agony of mingled surprise and despair. 'You don't mean to say Ionê Dracopoli's going to live with you ?'

'Oh, didn't I tell you that at first ?' Sacha

exclaimed, suddenly remembering herself. 'I suppose, having heard from her a lively account of how she met you in her Turkish costume on top of some high mountain in Morocco somewhere, I forgot you hadn't learned all about it from herself already. She was quite full of you when she returned; she says you're so strong, and so handsome, and so interesting. But, of course, all this has turned up since then. Well, let me see; this is just how it happened. After I sold my picture and came up to town to these lodgings, where I'm taking you now, I proposed to Blackbird, who is miserable at home—all her people are Philistines—that she should come and take rooms with me as a social experiment, and we should run a small flat on mutual terms together. So while we were still on the hunt, looking at rooms and rooms, Ionê Dracopoli turned up in town, Turkish trousers and all, and was taken up, of course, as a nine days' wonder. The Old

Girls' Club, at college, gave her a breakfast one day, which I attended, naturally ; and there she heard of my plan, and fell in with it heart and soul. She wanted to be one of us. She says there were always three Graces, and she must be number three ; and as for going without a servant, that was the dream of her existence. We two others were naturally glad enough to get her, for we'd been hunting in vain for a flat small enough and cheap enough to suit our purses ; and Ionê has money, so that by clubbing together we can do much better. Well, the end of it all was we've taken a dear little place behind Victoria Street, Westminster, and in a week from to-day we mean to move into it.'

Owen's heart beat fast. This was a terrible ordeal. He'd fully made up his mind never to see Ionê as long as he lived again. But he couldn't promise to give up paying visits to Sacha. There was nobody so near him or so sympathetic as she was. And though she

didn't know all his relations with Mr. Hayward—including the reasons why he was going into the diplomatic service—she was the only living soul on earth, besides his guardian, with whom he could allude in any way to the secret of his birth or his Russian origin. To everybody else he was just Miss Cazalet's nephew, the son of that half-sister who married somewhere abroad, and whose husband was supposed to have died in disgrace in Canada or Australia.

For the sake of the Cause, he dreaded the prospect of seeing much more of Ionê.

CHAPTER XII.

FINE ART.

AT the Academy, those same days, Lady Beaumont one afternoon strolled vacantly through the rooms, doing the honours of English art to her friend, Madame Mireff.

‘Yes, Sir Frederick’s are charming,’ she said languidly, deigning a glance, as she passed, through the aristocratic outrage; ‘but then Sir Frederick, of course, is *always* charming. Besides,’ with a sigh of relief, ‘I saw them all in his studio before they came here, you know,’ which absolved her accordingly from the disagreeable necessity of pretending to look at them now. ‘So exquisitely graceful, aren’t they? Such refinement!’

Such feeling!— Well, she answered me back to my face, my dear, “As good as you are, my lady.” Those were her very words, I assure you—“as good as you are, my lady.” So, after that, of course, it was quite impossible for me to dream of keeping her on one minute longer. My husband went in and packed her off immediately. Sir Arthur’s not a violent man—for a soldier, that is to say—and since he went into Parliament, between you and me, his temper’s been like a lamb compared to what it used to be when we were out in India; but that morning, I’ll admit, he flared up like a haycock. He sent her packing at once, passage paid, by the first train to Calais. So there I was, my dear—yes, a sweet thing, really; he does these Venetian scenes so well; a pleasant man, too; he dined with us on Saturday—so there I was at Grindelwald, left high and dry, without a maid to my name; and as I’m about as incapable as a babe unborn of

dressing my own hair myself, I had to go over to Interlaken next morning early to get it done up by a *coiffeur*, and then, if you can believe me, I was forced to sleep in it for three nights at a stretch without taking it down—wasn't it ridiculous? *figurez-vous*—just like a South Sea Islander with a neck prop—till Arthur had got out a new maid for me by telegraph from London.'

Madame Mireff smiled.

'What a slavery,' she said quietly, 'to be so dependent on a maid that one can't even go to bed in comfort without her! It reminds me of those slave-making ants Professor Sergueyeff told me about in Petersburg the other day, which can't even feed themselves unless there's a slave ant by their sides to put the food into their mouths, but die of starvation in the midst of plenty.'

Lady Beaumont stifled a yawn.

'Arthur says in a hundred years there'll

be no servants at all,' she drawled out in her weary way. 'The girls and the men of the lower orders will all be too fine and too well educated to wait upon us. But I tell him, thank heaven! they'll last *my* time, and that's enough for me. I couldn't do without. After us, the deluge.'

'That's a beautiful thing over there,' Madame Mireff put in, interrupting her. 'No, *not* the little girl with the drum; that's not my taste at all; I'm sick of your English little girls in neat, tight black stockings. The one beside it, I mean—827, Greek Maidens playing Ball. It's so free and graceful; so much life and movement in it.'

'It *is* pretty,' Lady Beaumont assented, putting up her quizzing-glass once more, with as much show of interest as she could muster up in a mere painted picture. 'I forget who it's by, though. But I've seen it before, I'm sure. It must have been in

one of the studios, I expect, on Show Sunday.'

Madame Mireff hunted it up in the catalogue—a rare honour at her hands, for her taste was fastidious.

'Aspasia's School-days,' she read out, 'Alexandra M. Cazalet.'

'Oh dear yes, to be sure!' Lady Beaumont cried, with a sudden flash of reminiscence. 'How stupid of me to forget! I ought to have remembered it. I'm glad Arthur wasn't here; he'd be vexed at my having forgotten. A county member's wife, he says, should make a point of remembering everybody and everything in the whole division. And I saw it till I was sick of it, too, in her studio at Moor Hill. So it is, I declare, Sacha Cazalet's picture.'

Madame Mireff caught at the name with true Slavonic quickness.

'Sacha,' she repeated—'Sacha Cazalet! Why, she must be partly Russian. That's

a Russian word, Sacha—it's short for Alexandra, too—and her name's Alexandra. Her mother must be a Slav. . . . And that's no doubt why I like her work so well. There's Russian feeling throughout, in both subject and execution; such intensity, such fervour, such self-restraint, such deep realism.'

'She lives down our way,' Lady Beaumont remarked with a casual glance at the intensity. 'She's a queer, reserved girl, self-restrained, as you say; a little too much so, perhaps, for me; and she has such a dreadful old woman for an aunt—old maid—you know the type: shedding tracts as she goes; red flannel; Dorcas meetings. Oh, quite too dreadful for anything in her black silk dress and her appalling black bonnet, with a bunch of mauve flowers in it. But there's no avoiding her. In the country, you see, a member of Parliament's wife must know the most ghastly people—you can't imagine what a trial it is. A smile and a kind inquiry—so—

after rheumatics or babies—for every old frump or old bore you meet on the footpath. Ugh! It's just too sickening. . . . But I never heard anybody say Sacha Cazalet was a Russian.'

'What's the aunt's name?' Madame Mireff asked suddenly, for no reason in particular, except that 'twas part of her mission to follow up every clue about every known or suspected Russian family in England.

'Why, Cazalet, of course,' Lady Beaumont answered at once, without pretending to any great interest either in person or picture. 'They're all three of them Cazalets.'

'Then they're her brother's children, whoever they are,' Madame went on rapidly, 'this Miss Sacha and the rest; or else, of course, their name couldn't be Cazalet, too. Who was their mother, I wonder?'

Lady Beaumont paused and stood still. It was too much effort for her to walk and think at the same time.

‘Well, I never thought of that before,’ she said, looking puzzled for a moment. ‘You see, they’re not in our set exactly; we only know them as we’re obliged to know everybody in the division — on political grounds, that is to say—garden-party once a year—hardly more than what you might call a bowing acquaintance. But it’s odd her name’s Cazalet, too, now you suggest it: for I’ve always understood Sacha’s mother and the old lady were half-sisters or something. . . . Perhaps she married a cousin, though. . . . But at any rate they’re Cazalets, this girl and her brother Owen, a great giant of a fellow who gets prizes at sports for jumping and running.’

‘And yet they call her Sacha,’ Madame ruminated, undeterred. ‘Well, that’s certainly odd; for Sacha’s real Russian. Though, to be sure, in England nowadays you call a girl anything. No language is safe from you. I’ve met a dozen Olgas at least since I

came to London. . . . And how old's this Sacha Cazalet? She paints beautifully, anyhow.'

'About twenty-five or twenty-six, I should say,' Lady Beaumont answered at a guess. 'And Owen must be twenty or a little over. Let me see; he was a baby in arms when he first came to Moor Hill, the year our Algy was born. Algy's twenty in August. The little girl was four or five then; and that's just twenty years ago.'

Madame Mireff all the while was examining the picture closely.

'Very Slavonic,' she said at last, drawing back and posing in front to take it all in; 'very Slavonic, certainly. . . . Pure Verestchagin, that girl there. And you say they came to Moor Hill twenty years ago now. How?—from where?—with whom?—was their mother with them?'

She spoke so sharply and inquisitively, in spite of her soft roundness of face and form,

that Lady Beaumont, with her society languor, was half annoyed at such earnestness.

‘I think it was from Canada,’ the Englishwoman answered, with still more evident unconcern, as if the subject bored her. ‘But I never asked the old aunt body much about it. I had no interest in the children; they were nothing to me. I believe their mother was dead, and something or other unmentionable had happened to their father. But Miss Cazalet was never very communicative on the point, because I believe the sister had gone and disgraced them in some way—went on the stage, I fancy I’ve heard—or, at any rate, didn’t come up to the district-visiting standard of social conduct. I never heard the rights or the wrongs of the story myself. Why should I, indeed? They were not in our society.’

‘Have they any friends—the boy and girl, I mean?’ Madame Mireff asked once more,

with the same evident eagerness. 'Who are the father's people? Don't they ever come across to see these two children—from Canada or anywhere?'

Lady Beaumont reflected.

'I don't think so,' she answered, after a pause. 'There's a guardian of the boy's, to be sure—or somebody they choose to call a guardian. But he comes very seldom. I saw him there this summer, though. A very odd man, with the manners of a prince, who's been everywhere in the world, and knows absolutely everything.'

'A foreigner?' Madame asked, adopting the English phrase and applying it with tentative caution to her own countrymen.

'Oh, dear no, an Englishman. At least, so they said. His name's Hayward, anyhow, and that's English enough for anybody, I should think. He's nobody in particular, either—just a photographer in Bond Street. He calls himself Mortimer and Co. in business.'

Madame made a mental note of the name at once.

‘I’ll go there and get photographed,’ she said. ‘I can ask about them then. Besides, I’m in want of a new portrait just now. I haven’t got any in stock. Lord Caistor asked me to give him one yesterday.’

And she subsided into a seat, holding that plump hand up to her round face coquet-tishly.

‘They say he’s quite a conquest of yours,’ Lady Beaumont suggested, with a mischievous look.

‘Oh, my dear, they’d say anything. Why, they say I’m an emissary of the Czar’s, and an unaccredited agent, and a spy, and an adventuress, and I’m sure I don’t know what else. They’ll be saying I’m a Nihilist next, or a princess, or a pretender. The fact of it is, a Russian lady can’t show the faintest patriotic pride or interest in her country in England without all the newspapers making

their minds up at once she's a creature of the Government.'

And Madame crossed one white hand resignedly over the other.

'That's a lovely bracelet, Olga!' Lady Beaumont cried, turning with delight at last to a more congenial topic.

Madame unclasped it and handed it to her.

'Yes, it's pretty,' she answered; 'and, what I prize still more, it's through and through Russian. The gold is from the Ural mines on General Selistoff's property. The sapphires are Siberian, from my uncle's government. The workmanship's done by a famous jeweller in Moscow. The inscription's in old Slavonic—our sacred Russian tongue. And the bracelet itself was given me by our dear good Empress. Hayward—no Mortimer and Co.—photographers, Bond Street. I won't forget the name. Here's her miniature in this locket. She was a darling, our Empress!'

'You belonged to her household once, I think?' Lady Beaumont murmured.

The remotest fringe of royalty interested the county member's wife profoundly.

'I belonged to her household once—yes. I was a lady-in-waiting. The Imperial family has always been pleased to be kind to the Mireffs. Prince Ruric Brassoff was there, too, in my time. Well, it's a beautiful picture, Sacha Cazalet's. Let's go away now, Anastasia. After that dreamy Russian vision I don't care to look any more at your stodgy English middle-class portraits.'

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HIGHER EDUCATION OF WOMEN.

A WEEK later Owen ran up by morning train from Moor Hill to see Sacha and her friends installed at their ease in their own new flat a little behind Victoria Street.

The flat itself, to be sure, with most of its inorganic contents, he had fully inspected already. It was daintily pretty in its modern—its very modern—way, with high white frieze of lincrusta and delicate yellow wall-paper; and Sacha had expended upon it with loving interest all the taste and care of an authority on decoration.

But this morning he came with a somewhat trembling heart to view 'the elective

family,' as Sacha called it—'the miniature phalanstery,' Owen christened it himself—settled down in its new abode, and to face the ordeal of a first meeting with Ionê Dracopoli in the ordinary everyday garb of feminine Christendom.

He touched the electric bell at the outer door with one timid finger. The door flew open of itself, after our modern magic fashion; and Sacha's voice was heard from a dim distance down the passage crying out, 'Come in,' in most audible accents. Owen followed the direction of the voice towards the drawing-room at the end, and entered the pretty white-and-yellow apartment in a flutter of expectation.

His first feeling on looking round was a vague consciousness of relief. Ionê wasn't there. How lucky! And how provoking!

Sacha jumped up and greeted him with a sisterly kiss. Then she turned towards

a long wicker chair with its back to the door.

‘This is Blackbird,’ she said simply, waving her hand in that direction; and Owen bowed his most distinguished consideration.

‘What a shame, Sacha!’ a full rich voice broke out from the depths of the chair, where Owen at first hadn’t noticed anybody sitting; ‘fancy introducing one that way! This is your brother, I suppose? But please don’t let him think my name’s really Blackbird.’

Owen peered into the long chair whence the voice proceeded, and saw a frail little woman stretched out in it lazily — a frail little woman who ought to have been eighteen, to judge by her development, but who, as Sacha had already informed him, was really twenty-seven. She was tiny, like a doll—not short, but small and dainty; and as she lounged there at full length with two

pallid hands clasped loose behind her shapely head, and neck thrown back carelessly, she looked too fragile for this earth—a mere delicate piece of semi-transparent Dresden china. Blackbird was dark and large-eyed; her eyes, indeed, though by no means too prominent, seemed somehow her most distinct and salient feature. Such eyes Owen had never seen in his life before. They were black and lustrous, and liquid like a gazelle's; and they turned upon him plaintively and flooded him with sad light every time she spoke to him. Otherwise, the frail little woman was neither exactly pretty nor yet what one could fairly describe as plain. She was above all things interesting. A profound pity for her evident feebleness was the first feeling she inspired. 'Poor wee little thing!' one felt inclined to say as one saw her. A fatherly instinct, indeed, would have tempted most men to lay one hand caressingly on her smooth black hair, as they took her pale thin fingers in

their own with the other. But her smile was sweet, though very full of pensiveness. A weary little soul, Owen thought to himself as he gazed, weighed down by the burden of this age's complexity.

'No, her name's not really Blackbird, of course,' Sacha responded quietly, in her matter-of-fact tone, looking down with a motherly glance at the shrinking figure in the low wicker chair. 'Her name, to be official, is Hope Merle Braithwaite. There, now—is that definite enough? Mr. Cazalet—Miss Braithwaite. You know her songs, Owen—and so you know herself. She is all one song. She evaporates in music. That's why I call her Blackbird, you see'—and Sacha smoothed her friend's head lovingly; 'she's so tiny and so dark, and she's got so much voice in her for such a wee little bit of a thing. When she sings, she always reminds me of a blackbird on a thorn-bush, pouring its full throat in a song a great deal too big

for it. You know the way their throats seem to swell and burst with the notes? Well, Blackbird's throat does just the same. She wastes herself in music.'

Blackbird unclasped her hands from behind her neck, and shook her head solemnly. Owen observed now it was well shaped, and covered with strait glossy hair, as black and as shiny as her namesake's plumage.

'Pure poetical fancy, evolved after the fact,' she said, smiling sadly, with the air of a woman who shatters against the grain one more cherished delusion. 'The reality's this: My parents were good enough to christen me Merle, after my Swiss relations, the Merle d'Aubignés; and I'm called Merle at home, though I was Hope at Oxford. And when Sacha heard the name, she thought it extremely appropriate to my dark hair and eyes, and she Englished it as Blackbird. That's the whole truth of the matter. All this other imaginative nonsense about pour-

ing my throat in song came *ex post facto*. It has nothing to do with the name. So there's how myth grows.'

And she folded the two pale hands resignedly in front of her.

Owen noted that '*ex post facto*' with becoming awe. Not for nothing had Blackbird studied dead tongues at Oxford.

'Well, what do you think of the flat?' Sacha asked, with a compassionate glance at the poor weak little pessimist. 'We've got it up nicely into form now, haven't we? Take a good look round the room, and then come and see my studio.'

'You've done wonders,' Owen answered, gazing about him, well pleased. 'And it's charming—charming! How lovely you've made that corner there, with those draperies and pipkins, and my Morocco mud-ware, too; so deliciously Oriental. That's Miss Braithwaite's, I suppose, the grand piano in the corner?'

The frail girl looked up at him with those great sad eyes.

‘*Not Miss Braithwaite,*’ she said calmly. And Owen noticed now at once a certain obvious disparity, as Sacha had suggested, between the full musical voice and the slender frame that produced it. ‘*Not Miss Braithwaite, if you please.* Sacha’s arranged all that already. She’s a splendid hand at arranging things—Sacha; she bosses the show, Ioné says, and I must admit she bosses it beautifully. So nice to have all the bother of living taken off your hands by a capable, masterful, practical person. That’s what I admire so in Sacha. Well, she’s decided that we’re all to be one family here—a pantisocracy, Ionê calls it; no Miss and no Misters. You’re to be Owen, and I’m to be Blackbird. Ionê’s cook—she’s out marketing now; and Sacha and I’ve just washed up the breakfast things. So, of course, it’s absurd, in such a household as this, to think

of calling one another Mr. What's-his-name or Miss So-and-So.'

'I don't see why, I'm sure,' Owen answered, much amused. 'A lady's none the less a lady, surely, because she can do something useful about her own house, as our grandmothers used to do.'

'But our grandmothers knew no Greek,' Blackbird replied, going off at a most illogical tangent. 'It's the combination that kills us, you know—Greek and household drudgery.'

'Come and see my studio,' Sacha interposed cheerily, leading the way to the next room.

It was Sacha's business to cut the little pessimist short whenever possible. And when the studio had been duly inspected they went on to the dining-room, and the bedrooms, and the kitchen, and the pantry, and the little scullery at the back, and a stone-floored office behind, full of chemical apparatus.

‘Why, what’s this?’ Owen asked, surprised. ‘Is Miss Dracopoli scientific, then, as well as literary?’

‘Oh dear no!’ Blackbird answered with a languid drawl, but always in that same rich voice; ‘Ionê’s nothing on earth. Like Du Maurier’s Postlethwaite, she’s content to “exist beautifully.” This is *my* laboratory, this room. But I’ve promised the girls never to make any *dreadfully* odorous stews in it. I couldn’t get along without a laboratory, you know. I must have somewhere to do my chemical experiments.’

Owen scanned the frail little body from head to foot, alarmed. Was this what female education was leading our girls to?

‘Greek—music—chemistry!’ he exclaimed, gazing down upon her five feet two from the calm height of his own towering masculine stature. ‘You don’t mean to say you combine them all in your own sole person!’

‘And not much of a person at that!’

Blackbird answered, with a faint sigh. 'Yes, that's how I was brought up. It's the fault of the system. My raw material all went off in brain and nerves, I'm afraid. I worked those so hard, there was nothing at all left to build up blood and bone and flesh and muscle.'

'But why on earth did you do it?' Owen couldn't help exclaiming; for Blackbird's frank remark was so obviously true. It might be rude of him to admit it, but he didn't feel inclined to contradict a lady.

'I *didn't* do it,' Blackbird answered piteously. 'It was my people who educated me. You see, they thought I was clever—perhaps I was, to start with; and they crammed me with everything on earth a girl could learn. Latin, Greek, modern languages, mathematics, natural science, music, drawing, dancing, till I was stuffed to the throat with them. *Je suis jusque là,*' and she put her hand to her chin with some dim attempt at

feminine playfulness. 'Like Strasbourg geese,' she added slowly in a melancholy after-thought; 'it may be good for the brain, but it's precious bad for the body.'

Owen stretched his big shoulders back, and expanded his chest involuntarily. The mere sight of that weak frame seemed to make him assert his own physical prowess by automatic contrast.

'But why do you go on with it now?' he asked simply. 'Why continue to work at this chemistry, for example? In poky London rooms you want all the fresh air you can get, surely. How infinitely better, now, instead of chemistry, to join a lawn-tennis club!'

Blackbird shrank back as if terrified.

'A lawn-tennis club?' she cried, all amazed. 'Oh dear! they'd be so rough. They'd knock one about so. I can't bear being bullied. That's why I like Sacha and Ionê so much; they're strong, but they don't

bully you. Oh dear! oh dear! *I* could never play tennis. I've been brought up to mix chemicals, and read books, and compose music: and it's like a reflex action now. I compose automatically; I test for acids like a machine. I've learnt to do these things till I can't get on without doing them.'

Sacha turned to him quickly, and said something short in a language which Blackbird didn't understand, good linguist though she was. But Owen knew that the Russian sentence she uttered so fast meant this in effect:

'That's just why I took her to live with us here. She's so frail and frightened; she needs somebody bright to put sunshine in her life—somebody strong and strong-willed to protect her and encourage her.'

'My own people are strong, you know,' Blackbird went on in the same plaintive voice, watching a still as she spoke, 'and they always bully me. They're Philistines,

of course ; but, do you know, I think Philistines are really the very worst on education. From the day I was born, almost, they kept me constantly at it. Papa's a colonial broker, though I'm sure I don't know what he brokes, or what broking is ; but he decided from the time I was a baby in arms I was to be thoroughly well educated. And educated I was—oh my, it's just dreadful to me even now to look back upon it ! Music from the time I could hardly finger the piano, Greek as soon as I knew my English letters, mathematics when most girls are only beginning arithmetic. Strum, strum, strum, from breakfast to bed-time. And then at seventeen I was sent to Lady Margaret. That was the first happy time I ever knew in my life. The girls were so nice to me. There was one girl, I remember——'

But at that moment a latchkey turned sharp in the door, and a light foot entered.

The sunshine had come. Owen turned round with a beating heart.

‘Is that Ionê Dracopoli?’ he asked, trembling, of Sacha.

And even as he spoke a tripping figure, with a basket held gaily in one hand, burst quickly into the laboratory.

‘Why, here’s Owen!’ the girl cried, seizing both his hands like an old friend. ‘I thought I heard his voice. Well, I do call this jolly!’

CHAPTER XIV.

IONÉ IN ENGLAND.

WHEN Owen had recovered his breath enough to take a good look at her, he saw in a moment for himself Ioné was simply charming.

In Morocco he had wondered vaguely more than once in his own mind how much of her nameless magic at first sight was due merely to the oddity and piquancy of her dress and the quaintness of the circumstances. You don't expect to meet a stray English girl every day pervading untrodden Atlas in male Moorish attire, and astride on her saddle-horse like a man and a brotner.

'Perhaps,' he had said to himself, trying to reason down his admiration for Mr.

Hayward's sake and in the interests of the cause, 'perhaps if one saw her in London in ordinary English clothes one would think no more of her than of the average young woman one takes down any day in the week to dinner.'

Well, he had the opportunity now to test this half-formed idea, and he found it break down in practice most conclusively. Ionê was beautiful—not a doubt in the world about that—as bright, as taking, nay, even, for that matter, as original and as free, in her loose Liberty dress, as in the embroidered jacket and Turkish trousers of her North African experiences.

A beautiful girl—fresh, fair, and vivacious; a perfect contrast to Blackbird, in her fluffy chestnut hair, her vitality, her strength; to Sacha, in her boundless spirits, her quick ways, her flowing talk, her very boisterousness and cheeriness.

'So here's Owen,' she repeated after a

moment, turning the contents of her basket out on the scullery table with delicious frankness. 'Well, this is just too nice for anything! I'm so glad I've not missed you. Come along, then, Owen, and make yourself generally useful in the kitchen, like a good fellow. You may help me, if you like, to get the lunch things ready!'

There was a fall in Russians. Mr. Hayward and the cause went instantly down to zero. Owen was conscious at that moment of only two objects in the whole round world, Ionê Dracopoli and a violent palpitation under the left side of his own waistcoat.

Never was luncheon prepared by so many cooks as that one. This was their first morning in the flat, so they were new to the work as yet; and, besides, flirtation and cookery went hand-in-hand together. 'Twas Arcadia in Pimlico. Ionê, in her soft woollen terra-cotta gown, with white apron in front, and man-cook's cap confining her free chest-

nut locks above, looked even prettier than ever in her new capacity. Owen held the saucepans for her to mix things in, as in the seventh heavens, or stirred the custard on the stove with rapturous fingers. Sacha prepared the meat, and took charge of the fire and the oven. Blackbird sat by, and exercised a general critical supervision of a pessimistic character. She knew the soup could never turn out right like that, and she had the gloomiest possible views of her own as to the success of the lemon cheese-cakes. But the event didn't justify the Cassandra of the flat, for lunch, when it arrived, was most brilliantly successful.

About three o'clock, however, as they rested from their toil after washing up the dishes, there came a ring at the bell, and Ionê, who had peeped out with intent to answer it, drew her head back suddenly, spying strangers through the stained-glass panels of the outer door.

‘ Goodness gracious, girls !’ she cried, all agog, glancing down at her apron, ‘ what shall we ever do ? I declare, it’s visitors !’

‘ Visitors !’ Sacha replied. ‘ And already ! Impossible !’

Ionê seized Owen most unceremoniously by the arm, and pushed him forward into the passage.

‘ You go and answer it, Owen,’ she said, laughing. ‘ You’re the most presentable of the lot ; and it’s men, I think—gentlemen.’

Owen went to the door. Sure enough, two strangers stood there, in the neatest of frock-coats and the glossiest of tall hats, with hot-house flowers in their buttonholes—a couple of men about town, Owen thought to himself, with fine contempt at first sight, if ever he saw a pair. They were aged about thirty, and looked as though their collars were their main object in life. Owen took a prejudice against them at a glance. These fellows were too dapper and too well groomed by far

for the big-limbed athlete's rough country-bred fancy.

'I beg your pardon,' the tallest and handsomest of the two said, with an apologetic air—he wore a gardenia in his buttonhole. 'I think we must have made a mistake. Does Miss Braithwaite live here?'

Owen held the door ajar dubiously in his hand, and blocked the entrance with his big frame, as he answered, in no friendly voice :

'She does. Do you want to see her?'

The young man with the gardenia answered, more modestly than Owen expected :

'Well, we'd like to send our cards in, and if Miss Braithwaite's not engaged we'd be much obliged if she could spare us just a very few minutes.'

He handed Owen his card as he spoke. Owen glanced at it and read, 'Mr. Trevor Gardener.' The gardenia was his mark, as it were—a sort of *armoiries parlantes*.

The other man, who was shorter and darker,

and wore an orchid in his buttonhole, handed his at the same time. It bore the name, 'Henley Stokes, 5, Pump Court, Temple.'

Owen couldn't say why, but the glossy tall hats and the neat frockcoats put his back up inexpressibly. He retreated down the passage with a hobbledehoy's awkwardness, leaving the two men standing sheepish at the open door, and said, in a loud voice, more plainly than politely, as he laid down the cards on the drawing-room table :

'Two fellows outside, come to call upon Blackbird.'

'Show them in!' Sacha replied, with as much dignity as if he were her footman instead of her brother; and Owen ushered them promptly into the bright little drawing-room.

Mr. Gardener, with the gardenia, was, like Paul, the chief speaker. To be sure, he'd never met Blackbird before, that was clear, nor had his friend either. They both bowed

distantly with a certain awed respect as they took their seats, and as Blackbird introduced them informally to the remainder of the company. But for a minute or two they talked society small-talk about flats in general, and this flat in particular, without explaining the special business that had brought them there that afternoon. They began well, indeed, by admiring everything in the room, from floor to ceiling. But Owen noticed now, somewhat appeased, that in spite of their hats and coats they were distinctly nervous. They seemed to have something they wanted to say, without being able to muster up the needful courage for saying it.

At last the man with the gardenia ventured to turn to Blackbird with a point-blank remark.

‘I dare say you’re wondering, Miss Braithwaite, what made us come to call upon you.’

‘Well, I confess,’ Blackbird said languidly, in that rich, clear voice of hers, ‘I *did* rather ask myself what on earth you wanted with me.’

Mr. Trevor Gardener paused, and looked straight into her big eyes. He was more nervous than ever; but he made a clean breast of it.

‘I’m at the Stock Exchange,’ he said at last, after a long-drawn interval. ‘In point of fact, I’m . . . I’m a broker.’

‘That’s bad!’ Ionê put in, with a twinkling eye full of mischief.

Mr. Gardener turned full upon her a look of most obvious relief. His face brightened visibly.

‘Why, just so,’ he said, more at his ease. ‘That’s precisely what I always say myself. That’s the reason I’ve come. A stockbroker’s bad. Most useless excrescence on the community, a stockbroker.’

‘Exactly,’ Sacha interposed, with her

grave, quiet voice. 'A middleman who performs no good service of any sort.'

Mr. Gardener brightened still more.

'Ah, there it is, you see,' he answered, rubbing his hands together, well pleased. 'I feel it myself, and so does Stokes, who's a barrister. He feels the Bar's a fraud. That's what emboldened us to come. We're weighed down by a sense of our own utter uselessness.'

'A very hopeful symptom,' Sacha responded, smiling. 'Conviction of sin comes first, repentance afterwards. But how did you happen to hear of us?'

Mr. Gardener pulled up his shirt-collar and rearranged his cuffs to hide his embarrassment.

'Well, we've the pleasure of knowing Mr. Braithwaite,' he answered very tentatively.

'Oh, indeed!' Blackbird replied, in a tone which showed clearly that acquaintance with

her father was no particular introduction to her.

‘In business!’ Mr. Gardener interposed deferentially, as who would deprecate her criticism. ‘And we’re musical—very musical. We hoped on that ground, at least—though perhaps we’re intruding.’

And he glanced at Owen, who sat, silent, on the defensive.

‘Not at all,’ Owen answered, much mystified, though with no very good grace. ‘We’re pleased, I’m sure, to see you.’

‘Well, we were dining at Mr. Braithwaite’s club with him last night,’ the man with the gardenia went on, looking askance at Blackbird, who sat in the long chair toying languidly with a fan, ‘and he happened to mention this compound household of yours, and what persons composed it. And it interested us very much, because we’ve both sung your songs, Miss Braithwaite, and both loved your music; and we’ve read Miss

Dracopoli's delightful tale on Morocco in the *Bi-weekly Review* with very great interest; and we've admired Miss Cazalet's Greek girls at the Academy. And though Mr. Braithwaite gave us, perhaps, a somewhat unfavourable version of your aims and ideas—indeed, threw cold water upon them—I may venture to say we sympathized with your desire for a simpler mode of life.' He glanced down at his spotless shoes with a sort of mute deprecation, and grew more inarticulate still as the subject closed in upon him. 'In point of fact,' he went on, growing red and stammering worse than ever, 'we both admired you all for it immensely.'

'And so?' Sacha said interrogatively.

'And so——' Mr. Gardener went on, looking at his friend for assistance. 'Now then, you help me out, Henley!'

Mr. Stokes, thus dragged into it, grew red in the face in turn, and responded in his place:

‘ Well, Trevor said to me, “ It’s a shame, if these ladies want to start a new household on rational principles like that, they should have to do all the rough work of the house themselves, isn’t it, Henley ?” And I said : “ So it seems. It’s not woman’s place to bear the brunt of hard work. I wonder what they’d say, now, if you and I were to step round and assure them of our—well, our sympathy with them in this new departure, and ask ’em if they’d allow us to call in every morning—before they got up, don’t you know—without necessarily meeting them or knowing them socially at all—just to light the fires, and clean the grates, and black the boots, and polish the knives, and all that sort of thing.” And Trevor said, “ Capital !” And so we decided we’d ask. And now—well, now, if you please, we’ve come round to ask you.’

Sacha looked at Ioné. Ioné looked at Sacha. Blackbird looked at both. And

then all three together burst out laughing unanimously.

That laugh saved the fort.

Owen joined in, and so did the young men, who really seemed, after all, like very good fellows. They laughed for twenty seconds without answering a word.

Then Sacha mustered up gravity enough to say, with a little burst :

‘But, you see, we don’t know you !’

‘Oh, we’re very respectable,’ Mr. Gardener put in, gazing down at his gardenia. ‘In fact, that’s just it ; we’re a great deal too respectable. This monotony palls. And we thought it so brave of you to attempt an innovation. We can give excellent references, too, you know—in the City or elsewhere. My friend’s an Oxford man ; I’m a partner myself in Wilson, Gardener, and Isenberger—very well-known house, Eve’s Court, Old Broad Street.’

And he folded one gloved hand somewhat beseechingly over the other.

‘But cracking the coal, you know?’ Ionê suggested, with a merry twinkle. ‘You couldn’t do that, now, could you, with those light kid gloves on?’

Mr. Gardener began hastily to remove one of the incriminated articles with little nervous tugs.

‘Oh, they come off, you know,’ he answered, with a still deeper blush. ‘They don’t grow there, of course. They’re mere separable accidents. And, besides, we’re so anxious to help. And we know Mr. Braithwaite. We can get letters of introduction—oh, just dozens of them, if you want them.’

‘But we thought it best,’ Mr. Stokes interposed, ‘to call at once, and strike while the iron was hot; for we were afraid—well, like the fellow at the pool of Siloam, don’t you know: while we waited, some other might step in before us.’

Sacha was practical. She was also not too afraid of saying what she felt.

‘The best thing,’ she suggested, after a moment’s reflection, looking the facts in the face, ‘would be for you both to stop to tea and help us get it. Then we might see how far you’re likely to suit the place, and whether we can avail ourselves or not of your very kind offer.’

‘That’s capital!’ Mr. Henley Stokes replied, looking across at his friend, and peeling his gloves off instantly. ‘If you try us, I’m sure you’ll find we’re not such a bad sort, after all—not such duffers as we look. We’re handy men about a house. And we’re tired of being no use in the world to anybody anywhere.’

And, indeed, before tea was over and dinner well cooked, the two young men had succeeded in making themselves so useful, so agreeable, and so ornamental as well, that even Owen’s first prejudice died away by

degrees, and he voted them both very decent fellows.

Ionê remarked in an audible aside that they were bricks; and Sacha declared with candour they could do more than she fancied.

In the end, it was unanimously agreed the community should accept their proffered services for the present, and during good behaviour, and that they might begin if they liked by lighting the fires and blacking the boots at half-past six next morning.

‘Hooray, Trev!’ Mr. Stokes exclaimed in a tone of triumph, looking across at his friend. ‘This is something like progress! This is better than stockbroking.’

‘I’m sure we’re very much obliged to you indeed,’ Mr. Gardener added, with a cheerful glance at a coal mark on his previously spotless cuff. ‘And to show you we’ve no

intention of intruding upon you in any way beyond what's strictly necessary in the way of business'—he took up his hat as he spoke—'we'll now bid you good-evening.'

CHAPTER XV.

AN INVITATION.

IN a week or two it was clear to the members of the phalanstery the young men with the frock-coats were an unmitigated success. 'Our Boys,' as Ionê called them, turned out trumps in every way. In spite of their kid gloves and their buttonhole bouquets, they weren't afraid of hard work, but buckled to with a will at the rough jobs of the household. As a rule, indeed, the joint mistresses of the flat saw little or nothing of their amateur manservants. They went to bed at night, leaving the ashes in the grates, and their shoes at their doors, and woke in the morning to find everything

cleared up, the rooms well warmed, and the house swept and garnished as if by friendly fairies. To be sure, this arrangement necessitated the entrusting of a latch-key to Mr. Gardener, the head-servant of the two—a step as to the wisdom and desirability of which Sacha at first somewhat hesitated. But the young men were so modest, so good-natured, so unobtrusive, and so kindly withal, that they very soon felt sure they were perfectly trustworthy. As Blackbird remarked, they were too simple-hearted to make it worth while sticking at conventions on their account. Mrs. Grundy was not evolved for such as they were.

Still, though the girls saw ‘Our Boys’ but at rare intervals, when those willing slaves loitered late over the fires, or when the locks got out of order, or when the windows wanted cleaning, common gratitude compelled them from time to time to ask their benefactors in to afternoon tea, that

mildest and most genial of London entertainments. The young men themselves, to be sure, protested with fervour that such politenesses were unnecessary; it was for the sake of the principle they came, they said, not for the sake of the persons. Yet from a very early period of their acquaintance Sacha fancied she noticed Mr. Henley Stokes betrayed a distinct liking for Blackbird's society; while Mr. Gardener, with the gardenia (a point of honour to the last), paid particular attention, she observed, if not to herself, at least to her pictures. A nice, honest young man, Mr. Gardener, at least, and as unlike as possible to Sacha's preconceived idea of the eternal and absolute typical stockbroker.

So she said to herself, indeed, one day, when from the recesses of Mr. Gardener's light overcoat, hung up in the hall, there tumbled by accident a small russia-leather-bound volume. Mr. Gardener, with a blush,

tried to pick it up unobserved and smuggle it back into its place again ; but Sacha's eye was too quick for him. She read in a moment the gilt lettering on the back.

‘ Why, it's poetry ! ’ she exclaimed in surprise. ‘ It's Keats ! What do you do with him ? ’

Mr. Gardener stammered like a schoolboy discovered in the flagrant crime of concealing a crib.

‘ I—er—I read him, ’ he answered, after a brief pause, with much obvious confusion.

‘ In the City ? ’ Sacha asked, smiling.

Mr. Gardener plucked up courage at her smile to confess the shameful truth.

‘ Well, a stockbroker, you know, ’ he said, ‘ has so much time hanging idle on his hands when there's nothing going on in his office, and it's such an unsatisfactory sort of trade at the best, and you feel it does you no good either spiritually or physically, or anybody else, either, for the matter of that ;

so in the intervals of my work I try—er—I try to develop, as far as I can, my own higher nature. And in the mornings I come here to light the fires and all that; and in the evenings I go down to my boys and girls at Stepney.'

'What's that?' Sacha asked quickly, catching the hint at once. 'I haven't heard about them yet.'

Mr. Gardener looked modest again.

'Oh, a fellow must do something, you know,' he said, 'just to justify his existence. And as I'm well off, and strong and healthy and all that, and society does so much for me, I feel bound in return to give a helping hand with these poor East-End people of mine, both in the way of organization and in the way of amusement.'

Sacha looked at him with some admiration. There was a sturdy honesty of purpose about this modest young man that touched her Russian heart to the core. And she liked

his reading Keats, too; it was a point in his favour. For he wasn't the least bit namby-pamby with it all, in spite of his blushes and his light kid gloves. She could see when he talked about his gymnasium at Stepney, a few days later, that he was a tolerable athlete; and he cleaned grates and split coal like no working man in London. When he proposed to Ionê that she and Sacha and Blackbird should come down to his hall at Stepney one evening to teach his lads to dance, they were all delighted; and when they went there, and found themselves among these rough East-End young men, Ionê, at least, thought it as jolly good fun as any Belgravia ball-room.

'You see, miss,' her first partner explained to her, in a confidential undertone, 'we chaps learns this sort o' thing a sight better from a lady than from our own young women. Ladies doesn't larf at us; and a chap don't like to be larfed at. Our own

gals, they calls us "Now then, clumsy," and all such sort o' names. But a lady's more patient-like. You shows us the steps, and we can pay more attention then, coz we knows you ain't a-larfing at us.'

'There's nothing to laugh at,' Ionê answered gravely, surveying her stalwart young costermonger with not unapproving eyes. 'We all have to begin. I had to begin myself once. And as for laughing, you should have seen how the people laughed at me over yonder in Morocco when first I dressed up in Moorish costume. like my picture in the paper there, and tried to ride as a man does! I laughed at myself, for that matter, till I thought I should never catch my breath again.'

And she smiled at him so sweetly that that young costermonger went home perfectly sober that night, and talked to his 'gal' about the faces of the angels in heaven, which naturally made his young woman

jealous, for she knew at once where the unwonted suggestion had come from.

So for four or five weeks events at the flat went on smoothly enough, and Trevor Gardener and Henley Stokes grew gradually on the footing of friends of the family. They even ventured to drop in of an evening, when Sacha's work was done, and Ionê had washed up the dinner-things, to accompany Blackbird in one of her own plaintive songs, or to read Austin Dobson and Lang to the assembled household. They introduced Hope indeed to the 'Ballade of Sleep'; and the poor girl spent at least a dozen wakeful nights in composing apt music between the clanging hours for that congenial dirge of dead and buried slumber.

At the end of that time, however, an event occurred which stirred the deep heart of the flat to its profoundest recesses. Owen came up one day from Moor Hill, glad of so good an excuse, with a letter from Lady

Beaumont, just received by post at the Red Cottage.

So gracious a letter from the county member's wife set them all wondering what on earth the great lady could want with them.

'MY DEAR MR. CAZALET,' it began ('Quite affectionate,' Ionê said, shaking out her chestnut locks round her head)—'My dear Mr. Cazalet, Sir Arthur wishes me very particularly to write and ask you whether you could come up to my At Home on Wednesday next, for which I enclose a card for you and your dear sister. We expect Lord Caistor; and as I know your desire to enter the diplomatic service, it can do no harm to make his acquaintance beforehand. Several of our artistic friends are so anxious to meet Sacha, too; and that, as you know, may be of use to her in future. One should always make friends of the Mammon of Unrighteousness as represented on the Hanging Committee.'

And if you *could* persuade her two companions, Miss Dracopoli and Miss Braithwaite, to come with you both, we should be so *very* much obliged to you. Many of our young men want so much to know them. Apologize for me to Sacha; I would have written to her direct, but I don't know the address of this famous joint-stock flat of hers that everybody's talking about. It's made quite a sensation among the advanced woman's rights women. They say it marks an epoch.

‘ In breathless haste,

‘ Yours very sincerely,

‘ ANASTASIA BEAUMONT.’

‘ She wants to lionize us,’ Ionê cried, looking up with her very unleonine soft round face, ‘ and I refuse to be lionized !’

‘ I never *will* sing in houses where I'm asked on purpose,’ little Blackbird said wearily. ‘ It's a rudeness to ask one just

for what they think they can get out of one.'

'But what a clever woman of the world she is!' Sacha put in, with a wise smile. 'She doesn't say a word about what she wants herself, but what she thinks will attract us on the ground of our own interest. Lord Caistor for Owen, possible patrons for me, admiration for you two—it's really very sharp of her.'

'For my part,' Owen interposed, with a side glance at Ionê in her dainty girlish beauty, 'I think what they want is, first, the girl who rode through Morocco alone, and, second, to be polite to a possible future constituent.'

'The question is, shall we go?' Sacha asked, always practical. 'Apart altogether from their motives, is it worth our while to accept, or isn't it?'

'Will *you* go?' Ionê asked, turning point-blank to Owen.

Owen felt his heart throb. Oh, Mr. Hay-

ward, Mr. Hayward, this girl will be too much for you !

‘ Yes, I think so,’ he said slowly, ‘ to see Lord Caistor.’

‘ Then I think I’ll go, too,’ Ionê answered, with a burst. ‘ After all, it’ll be fun, and I love these big crushes. You always find somebody you can shock in them somewhere. If I was to go in my Moorish costume, now—just fancy what a success ! How Lady Beaumont would bless me ! It’d be in all the papers.’

Owen’s heart beat higher still. He knew Ionê wanted to go because *he* would take her. And it made him feel so happy—and so very, very miserable. What would Mr. Hayward say if only he knew ? But is *this* the metal of which to mould a revolutionist ?

For to Owen the cause was a very real and a very sacred thing. And he was imperilling its future, he knew but too well—for the sake of a woman.

They talked much that afternoon, and hazarded many guesses as to why Lady Beaumont had bidden them all to her At Home. But not one of them came anywhere near the real reason of her invitation. For the truth was that Madame Mireff had said, in the most casual way, though with a sudden magnetic glance of those great luminous eyes of hers, 'I wish, Anastasia, you'd ask that Sacha Somebody when you have me next at your house. Her name puzzles me so much. I want to hunt her up. I must get to the bottom of it.'

CHAPTER XVI.

AT LADY BEAUMONT'S.

'You've heard of Prince Ruric Brassoff,' Sir Arthur was half whispering to a thin little lady by his side as Sacha wedged her way into an unobtrusive corner, 'the famous leader of the Nihilists? You remember; five hundred thousand roubles set upon his head. Well, they say she's in England now on purpose to ferret him.'

'And if she found him?' the thin little lady suggested in reply; 'she couldn't do anything to him here.'

Sir Arthur shrugged his shoulders. It was a foreign trick he'd picked up in Vienna when he was a military *attaché*.

‘Not openly,’ he answered, with a dry little laugh. ‘But poison, perhaps; or a knife—these Russians are so unscrupulous.’

Sacha’s calm eyes flashed fire; for she could remember Petersburg still, and her martyred father. But she followed the direction which both their glances took, and she saw a large-built woman with very fully-developed charms, who was talking with great animation and wide-open eyes to Lord Caistor by the mantelpiece. Sacha had never seen the Cabinet Minister before, to be sure, but she recognised him at once from the caricatures in *Punch* and the photographs in the shop-windows. Or, at least, if not the famous man himself, at any rate his still more famous eyeglass. As for the lady who was chattering with him, a flash of intuition told her somehow, by the aid of Sir Arthur’s words, it could be none other than Madame Mireff, the Russian spy or unaccredited agent, currently believed to exert so curious an

influence on Lord Caistor himself, and on that mysterious entity, his foreign policy.

‘The Prince is very rich, isn’t he?’ the thin little lady by Sir Arthur’s side asked curiously.

‘Was!’ Sir Arthur corrected. ‘He had millions at one time. But he flung away half his fortune on the Cause years and years ago; and the other half the Government very wisely seized and employed in suppressing it.’

‘And is he known to be in England at all?’ the thin little lady went on, looking sideways at the presumed Madame Mireff.

Sir Arthur shrugged his shoulders again.

‘How should I know?’ he answered with a laugh. ‘Quien sabe? Quien sabe? Prince Ruric Brassoff takes jolly good care, you may be sure, to keep well out of the way. He works like a mole underground. I’m told, indeed, it’s fifteen years since his own Nihilist friends even have ever set eyes on him.’

‘Then, how do they know he’s alive?’ the lady asked with languid interest.

‘Ah, that’s just the odd part of it,’ Sir Arthur replied, still gazing across at the stranger with his big speaking eyes. ‘They say, though nobody ever sees him, he’s still the active head of all the party in Western Europe, and the Russian Government has constantly of late years intercepted letters and documents signed in his handwriting. But if he’s to be found at all, you may be perfectly sure Madame Mireff will find him. She’s keen as a bloodhound, persistent as a beagle. She’s clever enough for anything.’

Sacha rose and moved unobtrusively across the room to Owen, who was standing with Ionê near the doorway, in the opposite corner. She had just time to murmur low to him in Russian :

‘Owen, beware of the woman who’s talking there to Lord Caistor. She’s a spy of the

Czar's. She's come over here to look for some Nihilist refugee.'

And even as these words escaped her lips, Lady Beaumont sidled across to her.

'Oh, Sacha, my child,' she said, quite affectionately, taking her hand with much warmth, like a good society hostess, 'I'm so glad you've come. There's a friend of mine here who's just dying to know you. And you have brought Miss Dracopoli, too, I see. I recognise you, Miss Dracopoli, by your likeness in the *Graphic*. How good of you to come round to my little gathering! I know you're so much engaged—everybody fighting for you just at present, of course—the tail end of the season! Come over this way with me, and I'll introduce you to Lord Caistor. And you must come too, Owen. Madame Mireff—one moment—excuse my interrupting you. This is the clever young artist whose picture you admired so much at the Academy the other day—Miss Cazalet, Mr. Cazalet.'

Owen bowed low with an awkward feeling of unwonted restraint. Never before in his life had he stood face to face with an avowed enemy of the Cause—one of the bureaucratic ring—and he felt at once the novelty and difficulty of the position. As for Sacha, she held herself very erect and proud, hardly nodding her head; but her breath came and went, and her face flushed crimson.

‘I’m glad—my work—interested you,’ she said, with an evident effort.

She’d have given millions to get away; the strain and stress of it was horrible.

But Madame Mireff only beamed upon her with those famous soft eyes, and said, with real kindness of tone:

‘Yes, it was beautiful—beautiful. I picked it out at once from all the pictures in the room. It had soul in it—soul in it. It went straight to my Russian heart; for you know, Miss Cazalet, I’m before all things a Russian, and everything about Russia always thrills

me to the finger-tips. We Slavs feel the magic of our common Slavonic ancestry far more, I believe, than any Western people. Russia holds us by some spell. *Cela nous entraine. Cela nous fascine.*'

Owen opened his eyes wide at this unexpected profession of faith—the enthusiasm with which Madame spoke reminded him so exactly of Mr. Hayward's own in his moments of deepest patriotic fervour. Was it possible, then, that these bureaucrats even—the despots, the enemy—shared that same unquenchable Slavonic zeal that burned bright like a fire in the friends of the Cause—the lovers of their country?

But Sacha only answered coldly, in her very driest voice :

'I fail to perceive the connection you draw between my picture and Russia.'

Madame glanced back at her, all motherliness, with kind melting eyes, in spite of this first rebuff. Her glance was mesmeric.

‘Why, surely,’ she said, exerting every spell she knew, ‘the spirit at least—the spirit is pure Russian. I cried out to Lady Beaumont the moment I saw it, “There’s Slav in that canvas!” and Lady Beaumont answered me, “Oh, that’s Sacha Cazalet’s picture.” So when I heard your name was Sacha, of course I took it for granted at once that your mother at least must have been more or less of a Russian.’

‘You’re mistaken,’ Sacha replied, in the same hard, dry tone. ‘My mother, on the contrary, was a pure-blooded English-woman.’

‘Your father, then?’ Madame suggested quickly.

Sacha parried the blow at once.

‘Really,’ she said, ‘I don’t admit my genealogical tree has anything at all to do with my pictures.’

Madame left the false track sharply with a diplomatist’s instinct.

‘Well, the painting’s a lovely one, at any rate,’ she said sweetly, ‘and the qualities in it that struck me as Slavonic are at least qualities of high idealism and profound moral truth. Whatever race inspires them, one surely can’t help admiring those, Miss Cazalet. There’s a freedom, a gracefulness, a vitality, an unconventionality, about the lithe figures of your beautiful classical girls that took my fancy immensely. And Aspasia herself—in the centre—what a soulful conception! So vivid and intense! Like our best Russian girls nowadays: free as the air, keen as the wind, fresh as the morning dew, yet capable, one could feel, of yielding her life like water for any good cause that in after-days might demand it.’

Owen listened astonished.

The voice was the same, though the words were so different. Was this the true Russian note, then? *La vie pour le Tsar*, or *Death for Freedom*?

Madame drew a vacant chair to her side, and motioned Sacha into it.

Against her will, as if drawn by some spell, Sacha sat down, burning inwardly.

Owen stood by in his big manliness, and bent over them, listening.

Then Madame began laying herself out as only a trained diplomatist and woman of the world could have done to make a conquest of Sacha. By slow degrees she led round the conversation to Sacha's art and her friends. She discussed Ionê with Owen, praising her beauty enthusiastically ; she discussed Burne-Jones with Sacha, finding something in common between the profounder Celtic and Slavonic temperaments.

Gradually, bit by bit, even Sacha gave way. She admitted the fascination of the woman who had talked over Lord Caistor and changed a foreign policy. Her conversation was so easy, so alluring, so *simpatica*.

As for Owen, he bent over her, entranced,

feeling the nameless attraction to a lad of a ripe woman of the world, ready and willing to deploy all her manifold charms of body and mind in one serried phalanx for his momentary captivation.

Ionê glanced across once or twice from her artlessly girlish self-revelation to that amused Lord Caistor, and felt her heart give a jump of doubt and fear within her. That horrid great Russian woman with the big, staring eyes was surely too much for any lad of twenty.

What struck Owen more and more, however, the more freely Madame talked, was the absolute identity (in fibre) of her Russian enthusiasm with Mr. Hayward's. Though the Russia of which she spoke was the Russia of the tyrants, yet the devotion with which she spoke of it was the devotion of the patriots. It was Czar and Empress against Land and People. For the first time in his life it dawned upon Owen faintly that what

he had here to deal with was in essence a temperament. Madame Mireff and Mr. Hayward saw the opposite sides of the same shield, according to their different points of view, but were both equally vehement and intense in the idea they formed of it. That's Russia all over. Your Slav is, above all things, a dreamer and an enthusiast.

At last, after much long and cleverly-guided discourse, Madame had succeeded in making even Sacha herself admit grudgingly in her own mind that the Czar's spy, in her private capacity at any rate, was an extremely agreeable, nay, well-meaning person. She had a rare gift of insinuating herself into your confidence, somehow ; of taking such a deep interest in your mind and your feelings, that you couldn't help warming up in the end into some responsive expansiveness. Then, suddenly, in the midst of her easy-going talk, Madame turned round to her and fixed her with her glittering eye.

‘In fact,’ she said, pouncing upon her with a strange foreign tongue, ‘as our Russian proverb puts it, “The smooth-worn stone on the river’s bed can never understand why the pebbles on the bank find the sun’s heat unpleasant.”’

She said it in Russian, as if she expected to be understood; and even as she uttered the words, she fixed her piercing glance, full of inquiry, on Sacha’s face. Owen bent over, still more attentive, wondering whether, thus attacked by so unexpected a flank movement, Sacha—that calm, imperturbable Sacha—would be taken off her guard or not. But the phlegmatic Slavonic temperament, almost Oriental in its passivity, stood her there in good stead. Sacha never moved a muscle of her quiet face, or changed colour for a second.

‘What does that mean?’ she asked languidly. ‘Will you kindly translate for us? As yet, thank heaven, Russian isn’t added to

German and French as a necessary part of an English girl's education.'

Madame's keen eye still rested on her like a hawk's. She translated it—wrong.

'“The polar bear wonders the grizzly should think his climate cold,”' she answered, with a bland smile of child-like innocence.

But, even so, Sacha gave no sign. Just the faintest tinge of a contemptuous curl at the corner of her mouth alone betrayed, if at all, her consciousness of the attempted deception.

'Very true,' she said calmly. 'We can only sympathize to the full with the troubles and joys we've ourselves experienced.'

Madame gave it up again for the present. This girl was too deep for her. It was only at the end of the evening, after talking to many of her willing slaves meanwhile, that the unaccredited agent returned to the Cazalets with a charming smile and an outstretched hand.

‘Well, good-night,’ she said. ‘*Au revoir*, that is—for I must meet you again. You remind me so of dear friends—dear friends of mine in Russia. And your brother—when I saw him it gave me quite a little start. . . . He’s so extraordinarily like poor Sergius Selistoff, of Petersburg.’

It was a sharp home-thrust—their own father’s name!—but Owen hoped he’d avoided it. He blushed and bowed. A young man may fairly blush when his personal appearance is under discussion.

‘*Au revoir*, then,’ he said, as frankly and unconcernedly as he was able. ‘It’s so kind of you to put it so.’

As they went home to the flat in the cab, an unwonted silence oppressed Ionê. She said nothing for a long time; then at last she observed, with much seeming *insouciance*:

‘What a talk you had, Owen, with that fat Madame Mireff! She’s handsome, too, isn’t she—even now. Must have been

beautiful when she was young! And what eyes she made at you, and how she stuck to you like a leech! It's a great thing to be six feet two—in Russia—apparently!

But at that self-same moment, Lady Beaumont, wearied out with the duties of her post, was saying, with a yawn, to her friend in the empty drawing-room:

‘Well, Olga, I hope you found out what you wanted.’

And Madame Mireff made answer:

‘Part, at least; not quite all. That is to say, not for certain. They're Russian, of course, as Russian as they can stand; but whether they're the particular people I imagine or not, I don't feel quite sure just yet. I must make further inquiries.’

‘You won't get them sent to Siberia, I trust,’ Lady Beaumont said, half seriously; for she rather liked that big, handsome Owen.

Madame drew back a step and surveyed

her from head to foot with a sort of innocent surprise.

‘Siberia!’ she repeated. ‘Siberia! Oh dear, that odious calumny! That ridiculous misconception! Must I explain it every day? Will you never understand us? Siberia is to Russia what Botany Bay was once to England. We send our criminals there. It’s a penal settlement, not a Bastille nor place of exile for political offenders. But you English will never give us credit for anything of that sort—never, never, never! That’s your thick-headed Teutonism, my dear. The French have more *esprit*. They see through all that *blague*. I assure you, Anastasia, I might just as well ask you not to let Lord Caistor send me, without reason assigned, to Pentonville or to Portland.’

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END OF VOL. I.